

The Fragility of City Living in Hong Kong

An Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Fine Art

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Sze-Yin Ching

Date

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On the academic side, I have had the fortune of being supervised by two outstanding artists, Kevin White and Terry Batt. Although they were tough at times, often challenging my point of view and arguments, they pushed me to find my limits and my true path, and allowed me to distil my thoughts. Thank you for being such patient mentors.

On the personal side, I could not have completed this research project without the boundless support and encouragement of my husband. I would also like to thank my mother and late grandma. They were the ones who gave me motivation for this endeavour.

Cicy

Hong Kong

Aug. 2012

Dedication

To my four-year old son Ching Fung.
Hope he will grow up in a people-oriented environment.

Abstract

Hong Kong as a city is ever changing and flooded with information. People living in a city often have very indifferent and detached relationships with each other, and with the city, because changes can happen so quickly and there are so many things competing for their attention. This research investigates and comments on the fragility of these relationships. I used linear elements inspired by the form and speed of roads and wild cursive script to express the rhythm of city living. I also looked for ideas from traditional Chinese thinking that could inform this investigation. I discuss the work of a number of artists that influenced my thinking and approach, exploring how they expressed problems they associated with city living.

In this studio-based project, I created a series of new works using porcelain and metal. These echo the concrete and steel we use to build our city. Using long, cursive and delicate porcelain wires, with linkages made by metal, the pieces aimed to be an expression of city living, with a focus on the fragility of relationships. They sought to reflect the pace of city living and the weaknesses of the relationships. This research project does not set out to provide any specific answers, but rather through visual means aims to contribute to an understanding of Hong Kong's social issues with reference to Chinese traditional thinking.

Contents

Declaration	i
Acknowledgement	iii
Abstract	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 Living in the City	3
2.1 Number	4
2.2 Change	5
2.3 Scale and Density	8
2.4 Isolation	10
2.4.1 Cities within the City	11
2.4.2 The Connecting and Dividing Roads	11
2.4.3 The Lost Human Touch	13
2.5 Sound	14
3 City Living by Contemporary Artists	17
3.1 Contemporary Views	17
3.1.1 Justin Wong (黃照達)	18
3.1.2 Leung Chi-Wo, Warren (梁志和)	24
3.1.3 John Fung Kin-Chung (馮建中)	29
3.1.4 Slinkachu	31

3.2	Summary	34
4	Cultural Linkage	35
4.1	Laozi	35
4.1.1	From Macro to Micro	36
4.1.2	The Dao	39
4.1.3	The Opposing States	39
4.1.4	Be Still	40
4.1.5	Weak and Not To Compete	42
4.2	Zhuangzi	43
5	Development of Studio Work	47
5.1	Part I – In Search of Focus Area	47
5.1.1	Shrinking Distances	47
5.1.2	Exploration in Massiveness	48
5.1.3	Roads in Metal Wires and Their Connections . . .	52
5.2	Part II – In Search of Materials	55
5.2.1	Using Porcelain Wires and Fragility of the Structures	57
5.3	Part III – In Search of Form with Speed	58
5.3.1	Wild Cursive Script (狂草)	58
5.3.2	Inspiration Through Toy Roads	72
5.4	The Fragility of City Living	73
6	Conclusions	77
	Bibliography	79

List of Figures

2.1	Roads dividing communities in Tseung Kwan O. Photo from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tseung_Kwan_O_2.jpg .	13
2.2	The Tsing Fung Street flyover was built so close to the surrounding buildings that one can literally walk out of the window and step onto the flyover. From Google Street View.	16
3.1	Ah But's game to kill time. From 黃照達, <i>Lonely Planet</i> , ed. 黎佩芬 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010), 26-7. . . .	19
3.2	Ah But emptying his trash. From 黃照達, <i>Lonely Planet</i> , ed. 黎佩芬 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010), 35. . . .	21
3.3	Ah But's bag, like most city dwellers, is full of electronic gadgets. From 黃照達, <i>Lonely Planet</i> , ed. 黎佩芬 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010), 12.	22
3.4	Package design of Leung and Wong's City Cookie (HK-Venice Version) for the Venice Biennale in 2001. From http://www.leungchiwo.com/cookie/cookie.html	25
3.5	City Cookie being served as performance, with greetings "Would you like a piece of sky?". Left: Hong Kong, 2000; right: Venice, 2001. Photos from http://www.leungchiwo.com/cookie/cookie.html	25
3.6	Rienermann's <i>type the sky</i> . From http://www.lisarienermann.com/index.php?/project/type-the-sky/	26

3.7	Video capture of Leung's <i>The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island</i> . Video from http://www.leungchiwo.com/kangaroo/1.html	27
3.8	No. 20 of Leung's <i>Asia's World City</i> , shown opposite to the Schoeni gallery in Central. Photo from http://www.leungchiwo.com/Asia_City/main.html	28
3.9	No. 32 of Leung's <i>Asia's World City</i> , shown at Kinwick Centre. Photo from http://www.leungchiwo.com/Asia_City/main.html	28
3.10	"2006-07-01, 15:19:26" by John Fung. Photo from http://www.asianculturalcouncil.org.hk/en/welcome/features_detail/20	30
3.11	"2011-02-27, 12:46:43" by John Fung. Photo from http://www.asianculturalcouncil.org.hk/en/welcome/features_detail/20	30
3.12	"John snail" by Slinkachu that wandered the streets of London. Photos from http://slinkachu.com/inner-city-snail	31
3.13	Example of Slinkachu's work: <i>Dreaming of packing it all in</i> . Photo from http://slinkachu.com/i/u/little-people/1_dreams.jpg	33
5.1	<i>Shrinking Distances</i> . A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.	49
5.2	<i>Shrinking Distances</i> . A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.	49
5.3	<i>Shrinking Distances</i> (detail). A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.	50
5.4	<i>Shrinking Distances</i> . A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.	50
5.5	Exploration in massiveness. Photo by author.	51

5.6	Exploration in massiveness. Finished pieces. Photo by Bertha Ma.	51
5.7	Exploration in massiveness. Detail of two of the pieces. Photo by Bertha Ma.	52
5.8	Various <i>Roads</i> in metal (2006). Photo by author.	53
5.9	Various <i>Roads</i> in metal (2007). Photo by author.	53
5.10	Various <i>Roads</i> in metal (2007). Photo by author.	54
5.11	A <i>road</i> in metal (2008). Photos by author.	54
5.12	Various <i>Roads</i> in metal (2008). Photo by author.	55
5.13	Peter Root building his buildings by stacking staples. From http://belopotosky.com/2011/09/09/peter-roots-staple-city/ and http://www.peterroot.com/index.php?/projects/low-rise/	56
5.14	Liz Hickok's <i>San Francisco in Jell-O®</i> project. <i>Jell-O Mold #2</i> (2009). Photo from http://www.lizhickok.com/14mold_horiz.html	56
5.15	Work by Sara Tse. <i>Dress no. 103</i> (2006). Photo from http://www.artbeatus.com/artists/SaraTse/S_ST_053.html	57
5.16	Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010). Photo by author.	58
5.17	Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010), in combination with metal parts. Photo by author.	59
5.18	Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010), in combination with metal parts. Photo by author.	60
5.19	Example of oracle bone script (甲骨文 <i>jiǎ gǔ wén</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle_bone_script	62
5.20	Example of Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文 <i>jīn wén</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:JinwenShisongding.jpg	63

5.21	Example of seal script (篆書 <i>zhuàn shū</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:XiaozhuanQinquan_sized.jpg	63
5.22	Example of clerical script (隸書 <i>lì shū</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:LishuHuashanmiao.jpg	64
5.23	Example of regular script (楷書 <i>kǎi shū</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:KaishuOuyangxun.jpg	65
5.24	Example of semi-cursive script (行書 <i>xíng shū</i>). This particular one is from <i>lán tíng xù</i> (蘭亭序) by Wang Xizhi (王羲之). Image from http://beyond-calligraphy.com/2011/12/01/woi-wang_xizhi-p1/	66
5.25	Example of cursive script (草書 <i>cǎo shū</i>). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Treatise_On_Calligraphy.jpg	67
5.26	Example of wild cursive script by Zhang Xu (張旭). Image from http://blogcache.artron.net/201104/25/527345_13037040501cbD.jpg	68
5.27	Example of wild cursive script by Huai Su (懷素). Image from http://www.ie-tek.com/pixelpost171/index.php?showimage=9	69
5.28	An example of the <i>Fragility of City Living</i> and an example of wild-cursive script by Huai Su. Photo by Eva Chan and image from http://www.shishu.info/xoops/modules/wordpress/index.php?p=55	72
5.29	Toy roads. Photo by author.	73
5.30	Road system in Hong Kong. Photo from http://depositphotos.com/3573138/stock-photo-Aerial-view-of-complex-highway-interchange-in-HongKong.html	74
5.31	From <i>The Fragility of City Living</i> series (top view). Photo by Evan Chan.	75

5.32 From *The Fragility of City Living* series. Photo by Evan Chan. (side view). 75

5.33 From *The Fragility of City Living* series (detail). Photo by Evan Chan. 76

Chapter 1

Introduction

I have lived in cities my entire life. Other than occasional escapes to the countryside or the wilderness, these conglomerates of man-made structures are where I learn, grow, call home, build my family, and probably where I will spend the rest of my life. Like many other city dwellers, I have probably become too accustomed to city living now, that it would be quite unimaginable for me to just pack up and leave, returning to the way of living that most of our forebears practised not too many years ago, when they lived in small villages, lived largely off the land, and were mostly self-sufficient. Living in a city has its price though. What we gain in convenience and arguably better job opportunities, we frequently pay for through an increase in fragility in our relationships between people, and with our surroundings.

The relationships that one develops in a city like Hong Kong are often full of paradoxes. We live relatively convenient and comfortable lives; are surrounded by huge machinery and infrastructures, and have an abundance of material goods. We have access to a lot of people, but we interact with only a few, if any. The fragility of this relationship with the city has been a major focus of interest in recent years. My latest works are small, approachable, intimate, silent, fragile and simple, and I wish to

contrast them with how one might feel about living in a city like Hong Kong: dense, distant, bold, busy, colourful and materialistic. Through this new series of work I aim to stimulate the audience to reflect upon these issues, and re-evaluate our relationship with the city, and its inhabitants.

As evidenced from arguments put forward by Chinese philosophers Laozi and Zhangzi¹, small is not necessarily weak, and weak is not necessarily undesirable. Quite often, we put our cities' entire focus on becoming taller and going faster, without examining the impact of these developments on the inhabitants. A central aim of this research project is to establish a new personal language, with which I can draw attention to the fragility of relationship faced by city dwellers in Hong Kong.

1. See Chapter 4.

Chapter 2

Living in the City

The city is not a recent invention. According to Spielvogel, the development of civilisation thousands of years ago was a result of a large number of human beings sharing a number of common elements.¹ Over the years, the city has become the centre of political, economical, social, cultural and religious development. According to Miles et al, a city is a set of practices. It is a place where things happen and people act. It is a place of making and consumption, driving and walking, teaching and learning, jostling and sleeping.² It is also a set of beliefs. To live in a city, one has to have faith in a huge range of illusions including for example, the belief that paper money is valuable, cars will not intrude on pedestrian safety, and strangers are not dangerous. Not everyone, however, has a choice to not live in a city. Technology and political imperatives drive people from the land, so that now more than half the human inhabitants of the planet live in cities.³ The settlements in which these dwellers congregate have little to do with western notions of the city as an embodiment of civilisation.

1. Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: A Brief History*, 3rd (Wadsworth Publishing, 2004), 5.

2. Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden, eds., *The City Cultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1-2.

3. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision* (Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2011), 4-5.

The advance of civilisation has been linked with urbanisation and the development of cities. In recent years, the pace seems to have accelerated. In this chapter, we will explore how one might perceive living in a city like Hong Kong.

2.1 Number

A hundred years ago, only one in about eight people on earth lived in an urban setting, and today, more than half ⁴. By 2050, this proportion is expected to rise to almost seven out of ten. More and more people are moving to or living in a city. The world's urban population, however, is not distributed evenly among cities of different sizes. While three in five people living in cities resided in those with less than one million people in 2011, by 2015 only one out of two will live in cities of this size. In the future, urban populations will increasingly be concentrated in cities of one million or more people. In fact, amongst the cities with a million plus people, megacities with more than ten million will experience the highest rate of population increase. In the 1970s, there were only two megacities, Tokyo and New York. In 2011 there were 23, and by 2025, this number is projected to reach 37. In the forty odd years between 1970 and 2011, the number of people living in these megacities increased 10 times, from 39.5 millions to 359.4 millions. It is expected that this number will almost double by 2025 and reach 630 millions. The world's largest cities are getting more and more densely populated.

In Hong Kong alone, the population grew over ten times during this period. During my lifetime, there has been an addition of over three million people calling this city home.⁵

4. Data for this section, if not stated otherwise, are from *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2011 Revision*.

5. *Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics* (Census and Statistics Department, HK-SAR, December 2011), Table 1.1; *Hong Kong Population Projections 1971-1991* (Census and

In the city, one is almost consistently in the company of other people. With so many encounters, there ought to be greater opportunities for interaction. But are there? It seems the more opportunities we have during our daily lives to meet and socialise, the more likely we are to shut down our senses and stay inside the bubble that we artificially create, intentionally or otherwise. Stepping into a subway train in any big city like Hong Kong, you will see people wearing headphones, staring at their mobile phones, reading a free newspaper, jockeying for position for the best exit strategy and planning for the next move, or simply giving the blank stare. This is perhaps how Miles *et al* discussed Georg Simmel's seminal essay from 1903, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. Simmel's perspective on the interaction of metropolitan dwellers was that seeing the size, density and sheer quantitative excess of the city causes an "intensification of nervous stimuli" among its residents, leading them to adopt an "indifferent blasé attitude" to each other. Their everyday exchanges are then like the exchanges of money commodities – impersonal, distant and cold – while other aspects of city life are rendered into matters of quantity rather than quality.⁶ It is as if we are all afraid of saying hello to each other, fearing that such small exchanges would add up quickly and consume all our energy, since there are so many of us around. Instead of choosing and deciding when to react, many of us just shut off completely and essentially disconnect from our surrounding, and society.

2.2 Change

In addition to being densely populated, the development of the city itself, also proceeds at an extraordinarily fast pace. The amount of changes in Hong Kong during the past 50 years is a good example of this. Hong

Statistics Department, Hong Kong), 4.

6. Miles, Hall, and Borden, *The City Cultures Reader*, 140.

Kong transformed from a small town at the edge of China, to a truly global city. Pick any street corner in Hong Kong, and it is not uncommon to see that it has completely changed within just a few short years.

Siu attributed this partly, to the pro-development government in Hong Kong, and the creation of the Urban Renewal Authority in the late 1990.⁷ He studied the development and changes of Chung Yeung Street in recent years. This street is located in North Point, and is a multi-purpose space that was highly interwoven with the local community. Its narrow road surface was being shared by hawkers; wet markets; shoppers; pedestrians, and tram and automobile traffic. From the 1950s to 1980s, North Point was still a mainly residential area, and Chung Yeung Street evolved organically into a centre for the local community due to the necessities and needs of the surrounding inhabitants. These changes were driven by people involved in the community, and were at a pace probably deemed necessary and acceptable. From the late 1980s, the government began to assert more control over the hawker operations, and encouraged the development of commercial buildings along this busy street under the framework of urban renewal. This resulted in a tidying up of the street scene, and modernisation of the surrounding areas. A side effect, though, was the breaking up of the continuation of the local community due to the newly erected office buildings. According to Siu, Chung Yeung Street is “no longer a place for sharing and lingering”. Urban development is driven by the expected economic return of the particular projects, but the social costs to the local community are often neglected. The same is happening in the UK and Western Europe, where specialist shops and corner shops in towns are being replaced by superstores. These shops are often important centers of community life serving as places where people from the community share and exchange

7. Kin-Wai 邵健偉 Siu, “褪色的社區：都市重建計畫下的春秧街,” in 書寫城市 *Narrating Hong Kong Culture and Identity*, ed. Ngai Pun and Lai-Man Yee (Oxford University Press, 2003), 361-392.

ideas, and form acquaintances.⁸ Changes like these that were propelled by external forces probably caused more anxiety to the locals than the internally generated organic changes.

The areas where I grew up, Shek Kip Mei and Prince Edward for example, are also hardly recognisable now. Most of the landmarks that were prominent parts of my memory have completely vanished. The notion that the same store would remain at the same location from our childhood through adolescence would now be the exception rather than the norm. Our precious memory of growing up seems to have no anchor to hold on to. This perhaps makes us feel more like drifting through the city, rather than living in a community. In contrast, in smaller cities and rural areas, buildings are often allowed to stand for many more years, and the same shop can often afford to stay at the same address for generations. I lived in Edmonton, Canada for a few years when I was growing up. When I returned there in recent years, I could still visit the same craft store, go to eat at the same downtown Vietnamese noodle house and even visit the same friends still living in the same house that they grew up in. Some people would argue this as a lack of progress, but to others, continuity such as this allows us to feel connected to the community, and to a sense of place.

Hong Kong is by no means the only city that is changing at uncomfortably high speeds. In China, cities such as Shanghai and Beijing are witnessing the demolition of city block after city block to make way for new developments. The cityscape is not the only thing that is being rebuilt. The cultural shocks that accompany the influx of new ways of living run much deeper. Insecurity created by the diminution of structures, institutions and practices is leaving the citizen in a more vulnerable position.⁹ These topics, however, are outside the scope of this research.

8. Paul Hopper, *Rebuilding Communities in an Age of Individualism* (Hamshire: Ashgate, 2003), 66.

9. *Ibid.*, 58.

2.3 Scale and Density

It seems cities are gravitating towards being either very dense, or very big.¹⁰ In Section 2.1, we looked at the sheer number of inhabitants in cities. Here we look at ways in which these cities host their constituents, and how these planned or unplanned development trends affect the way the inhabitants' relate to each other. At one extreme, in a city like Hong Kong, populations can become highly concentrated, with most people living in very compact high-rises. At the other extreme, many cities in America and Canada seem to have spread out to form miles and miles of sprawling suburbs.

Hong Kong is very dense and crowded. Or is it? In terms of overall population density, Hong Kong had approximately 6,800 people per square kilometre, less than one third of our neighbouring city Macau, which had a density of around 19,400, both 2010 figures from the World Bank.¹¹ At the same time, one of Hong Kong's districts, Mong Kok, has the highest population density (130,000 per sq. km) in the world. Hong Kong's developed land area, however, is only about 22 % of the total land area. Over 40 % of the city's land belong to country parks, and are protected by law from any development. One can argue that the density and crowdedness of areas that Hong Kong residents congregate in is a result of both necessity and government policy.¹² In order to maintain a stable supply of potable water, the government of the early days had no choice but to reserve large swathes of land for the collection of water. Moreover, in order to support the city's coffers, the government limited the supply of land so that it could extract maximum revenue. All these factors con-

10. 陳翠兒 et al., *The 逼 City*, ed. 何慶基 (Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR, 2006), 11-20; John J. Macionis and Vicent N. Parrillo, *Cities and Urban Life*, 2nd (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001), Chapter 4.

11. The World Bank, *Population density (people per sq. km of land area)*, last accessed May 15, 2012, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST>.

12. 陳翠兒 et al., *The 逼 City*, Chapter 2.

tributed to very dense living conditions, even in the early days. The high density makes life quite convenient in Hong Kong. Everything seems to be around the corner. It also affects the development of highly efficient public transport systems. Also, because Hong Kong people are used to a crowded living environment, they tend to fill their calendar with engagement after engagement.¹³ Ironically, because of this constant bombardment of information and attention seeking, Hong Kong people have developed to a significant degree, a self-protecting mechanism. They keep their distance, are more calculated, and tend to be indifferent to their surroundings.¹⁴

On the other end of the spectrum is sprawl. It is a term used to “describe spread-out or low-density development beyond the edge of services and employment”.¹⁵ It separates where people live from where they work, study, shop or pursue leisure activities. A sprawl is usually the result of decades of unplanned and rapid growth. Government policies on taxation, transportation and housing encourage virtually unlimited low-density development. Massive acres of surrounding farmlands are gobbled up to make way for rows and rows of cookie-cutter style housing, mega-malls and industrial parks. People living in sprawls are highly dependent on automobiles; any and every activity requires a separate trip by car. Although to many, a sprawl provides a relatively affordable means of owning a house on a large lot and enjoying the convenience of shopping at mega-malls and outlets, it is not without its toll. Air pollution, traffic congestion and visual blight are amongst the more visible problems.¹⁶ A typical worker in Atlanta, USA, would drive around 70 *km* to and from work each day. It is not uncommon for workers in sprawling American cities to spend an hour and a half on commuting each way.

13. Ibid., 89.

14. Ibid., Chapter 6.

15. Macionis and Parrillo, *Cities and Urban Life*, Chapter 4.

16. Ibid., Chapter 4.

More highways are not the answer though, as history has shown. Building more highways places excessive strain on the city's budget, creates more pollution, destroys more farmland, and only creates more severe problems down the road, like bankrupted local governments, burdened tax payers, unpleasant cityscapes and ultimately, unhappy inhabitants. More importantly, by creating sprawls, we have ignored the most basic understanding of how to keep a society stable, safe and healthy.¹⁷ The lack of genuine community, like stores, shops, restaurants and cafes where residents, neighbours and friends can shop, eat and meet, results in the inhabitants of these sprawls becoming alienated. They need to use their cars to shuttle back and forth to widely dispersed supermarkets, mega-malls, fast-food outlets and office parks. Despite all of the people who live and work in these places, they are not communities. Connections are rarely made or sustained. People arrive anonymously and leave without anyone noticing. Moreover, sprawl inhabitants live isolated inside their home, rather than being able to mingle in public spaces with others.¹⁸ All of this diminishes opportunities for human interaction.

In large cities, structures that we live in and interact with every day are enormous. Our buildings are getting taller; our shopping centres bigger; our highways wider; our trains longer; but our sky smaller. Because the ultimate goal is to strive for efficiency, these structures ultimately become inhuman, distant and cold.

2.4 Isolation

Although cities are busy and bursting with activity, they are still able to make us feel isolated. The first example given below is probably some-

17. Douglas E. Morris, *It's a Sprawl World After All - The Human Cost of Unplanned Growth and Visions of a Better Future* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publisher, 2005), Chapter 1.

18. *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.

what unique to Hong Kong, and the second one is quite universal to most cities. The third seems to represent a downward spiral that began many years ago.

2.4.1 Cities within the City

Since the 1970s, private housing development in Hong Kong has been characterised by clusters of high-rise buildings, with their own markets or shopping malls. Mei Foo Sun Chuen in Kowloon and Taikoo Shing on Hong Kong Island are early and notable examples, with populations around 60,000 and 70,000 to 80,000 respectively.¹⁹ These are almost self-sufficient villages, where the inhabitants are able to survive without ever leaving the boundaries. These sub-cities are normally constructed on elevated floors, enabling people to wander about inside without ever getting in touch with the outside world, or their immediate surroundings. People are free to roam, so long as they don't diverge from the builders' master plan. These developments are often quite detached from the surrounding communities. Unlike the type of neighbourhood that we can see in more pedestrian-friendly cities, where one neighbourhood would merge into another quite seamlessly, these man-made islands are really quite isolated. They are designed primarily to enhance commercial values for the developers. If it is hard to move to neighbouring communities, inhabitants have little choice but to spend most of their time within the city walls. The communities are broken into man-made pieces.

2.4.2 The Connecting and Dividing Roads

I once needed to go to an industrial building near one of the satellite cities, Tsuen Wan, to have my stereo serviced. I took the recommended exit after travelling underground on the Mass Transit Railroad. Little

19. 陳翠兒 et al., *The 逼 City*, Chapter 3.

did I realise that after I got to street level, I had to walk five minutes in a direction away from where I wanted to go, cross the roadway via a foot-bridge, then walk five minutes back to the opposite side of the MTR exit, before I could walk towards my destination. The neighbourhood was inevitably and forever, cleaved by the roadway. Street-level connections were non-existent, probably to keep the traffic flowing. Communities are cut into islands, forever disconnected from their surroundings.

However, roads can of course, also connect. They allow us to get around, to communicate, and simply survive. City planners in every city are trying to find the right balance; however, it seems that segregation is more prominent in Hong Kong than connection. Tseung Kwan O in Hong Kong is one typical example.²⁰

Tseung Kwan O is one of the nine new towns of Hong Kong. Its planning began in the early eighties, and it has now developed into a substantial residential area with more than four hundred thousand inhabitants. The town was mostly built on reclaimed land. There were few limitations when the town was designed, no natural landmarks and there were very few historical elements for the town to be based upon.²¹ These circumstances turned this new town into the *bedroom of the city*, whose purpose is to provide a large number of residential properties to satisfy the swelling middle-class population.

The development of Tseung Kwan O began with roads, which carved up the vast 10 km^2 of reclaimed land (see Figure 2.1). The resulting zones became several unconnected, unrelated clusters, each with its own supporting facilities. Each of these clusters is dominated by huge shopping centres, with a very inward-focused design. All of the citizens of these mini-cities are discouraged to wander beyond the boundaries of these shopping centres. There are virtually no shops lining the connecting

20. *Tseung Kwan O New Town*, last accessed Apr 22, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tseung_Kwan_O_New_Town.

21. 陳翠兒 et al., *The 逼 City*, 55.



Figure 2.1: Roads dividing communities in Tseung Kwan O. Photo from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tseung_Kwan_O_2.jpg.

roads and few pedestrians stroll the sidewalks, contributing little to a true community spirit. The sole purpose of the roads is for transportation, and to get people in and out of the clusters. They are not viewed as part of the public space for the community, and so were designed to be extremely pedestrian unfriendly. The lack of prominent landmarks such as parks, gardens and other public areas in the vicinity, also make the whole town very bland. One would be hard pressed to know one's orientation if airdropped into a randomly picked location. The development of this new town and the resulting land islands exemplify the dividing power of roads.

2.4.3 The Lost Human Touch

There is no doubt that we live in a very efficient and automated world. We get cash through ATM machines; top up our Octopus Card ²² via automated note-readers; embark on an underground journey through automated gates; pay for groceries at self-check counters and ask for directions using voice-recognition systems. Even some of our trains are

²². This is the omnipresent prepaid card in Hong Kong that is really an electronic purse for small-value transactions.

driver-less. Our society is becoming so efficient that we hardly need to interact with real humans anymore to get through our daily chores. The prime goal behind this drive towards total automation is on the one hand to save cost, and on the other, to provide more consistent service. We now get more services at lower costs, but not better services. This also drives us further down the road of isolation within a city.

Such a tendency is evident in the practices of Call Centres, which ensure there is little possibility of friendly conversation between the customer and operator.²³ The interaction is usually scripted by a list of questions from the computer; both the nature and pace of the conversation is thus pre-determined. Person-to-person communication and interaction become less common in many types of business transaction. Personal service is considered by many firms to be an “unnecessary and expensive way of doing business”, resulting in a further diminishing of human interaction.²⁴

2.5 Sound

Hong Kong, like many dense cities, is noisy. According to the Environment Protection Department of HKSAR, over one million residents are affected by excessive traffic noise alone.²⁵ All through the day, we are constantly being bombarded with man-made noises. Step into one of the trains on our mass transit system and you will be hard pressed to conduct a conversation at a normal sound level. Go back to street level, and things are not much better. Here, buses and passenger cars compete for the scarce roadways, with sounds reverberating from their roaring engines and screeching brakes around the corridors of surrounding build-

23. Hopper, *Rebuilding Communities in an Age of Individualism*, Chapter 4.

24. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

25. EPD - Noise, 2008, http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/english/environmentinhk/noise/noise_maincontent.html.

ings. Try closing your eyes in one of the shopping malls, any mall, and you can feel the body being overcome by a multitude of sound sources. Everyone is trying to capture your limited and diminishing attention. There are giant video screens on literally every street corner, with their audio blasting out at will. Many of our buses have television channels with audio that you cannot escape. Even when we get back to our home, our sanctuary, many of my friends cannot bare the sudden silence, and have to turn on their television the instant they step inside. They claim they don't watch much, but prefer to have some noise around nonetheless, to break the loneliness, and to cope with one's own company. It is as if noise has become the battle hymn of their fight for survival in this big city.

Having to face the constant noise can be both physically and emotionally draining. Many of my friends are left with little energy and desire to connect, let alone building relationships with, their surroundings.

A peculiar phenomenon that is probably quite unique to Hong Kong is the closeness of some overpasses to neighbouring buildings.²⁶ When a road is over-saturated with cars, the "solution" is often simple; build another layer on top. And if there are buildings alongside the road, just build the overpass as close to the buildings as possible. One famous example is the Tsing Fung Street flyover (Figure 2.2) near Causeway Bay in Hong Kong. Travelling along this route on a bus, one would simply be awed by the ceaseless noise and pollution that neighbouring residents have to endure. At the same time, like a hatchet, the overpass cuts open an almost entire cross-section of the neighbourhood, exposing the daily lives of the residents to all road users, much like a montage of city living in Hong Kong.

26. 陳翠兒 et al., *The 逼 City*, 74-77.



Figure 2.2: The Tsing Fung Street flyover was built so close to the surrounding buildings that one can literally walk out of the window and step onto the flyover. From Google Street View.

Chapter 3

City Living by Contemporary Artists

Our surroundings have such a substantial impact on who we are and how we act. It is no wonder that numerous artists find city living a fascinating topic for investigation. This chapter is a survey of how some of my contemporaries are affected, inspired, irritated, ignored, befriended, and confused by the city they live in, and how they use their work to discuss the issues they find closest to their heart.

3.1 Contemporary Views

To many people, a successful city is where things are tall, big, fast and strong. We are awestruck by the tallest building in town, the fastest cars, the most expensive houses and the latest gadgets. Yet often, the price we pay in the pursuit of these things is the isolation between human beings, and the loss of human touch. A large number of contemporary artists are intrigued by this lack of human interaction in large cities. Many resent the rapidly changing cityscape, and the associated decline in care for its inhabitants. Numerous artists from Hong Kong and abroad have

explored these issues, raised questions and aimed to involve or promote the audience to reflect on their experiences of city life.

3.1.1 Justin Wong (黃照達)

Justin Wong is a Hong Kong-based comic artist with a background in fine art. He creates comic strips, which are often focused on local political issues. His comic characters, are created by computer, and he consciously employs repetitive elements in his work using cut- and-paste, with the intention of creating a surreal experience. Through his work he protests against the uniformity of our society, and city-living in general.

In his recent book *Lonely Planet*, a collection of his daily comic strips for a local newspaper, Ming Pao, he depicts the main motivation for his creation as being his discontentment with city life.¹ His protest, however, has always been gentle, resembling the constant murmuring from a kind and caring mother, or the whispering between young lovers. We all know this uttering are not likely to make any difference, but yet are compelled to do it, possibly out of love, possibly out of responsibility. He does not wish to be considered as openly rebellious, fearing that more drastic resistance to changes. Wong characterises this dilemma as our urge to change but dread at the prospect of adapting to new ways of living, and our desire to think out-of-the-box but yet wanting to be politically correct, all at the same time.²

When the protagonist of his comics, Ah But, loses his job and gets bored with doing nothing at home, he dreams up a game to kill time (Figure 3.1). He would start wandering in the street, and say “Good morning!” to the first stranger that he saw. If the stranger were to show any form of reaction, he would turn left; otherwise he would cross the street. Other times he could wander as he wished. At the end of the day, he reports

1. 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, ed. 黎佩芬 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010).

2. *Ibid.*, Preface.



Figure 3.1: Ah But's game to kill time. From 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 26-7.

that he had met two friends, four police officers, three friendly fellows, thirteen smiling faces, thirty six sad faces, delivered sixty seven greetings, and is rejected sixty three times. The whole exercise is a bit tiring, but nonetheless quite a pleasant experience. Only four of his random encounters result in a positive reaction.

This reminds me of a story that one of my Canadian friends used to tell. He had lived in Vancouver for many years, and got used to saying "Hello" and "How are you doing?" to total strangers. A few years ago, he relocated to Hong Kong. He knew and understood that people in Hong Kong seldom talk to strangers. Out of habit though, in one instance he said "Good Morning!" to the lone rider when he entered an elevator. The shock and uneasiness of that person's reaction truly amazed him. He could not understand why Hong Kong had one of the highest population densities in the world and yet its inhabitants seemed so unaccustomed to interacting with each other. He continued this habit for a while before slowly giving it up, and gradually becoming like a local.

In another series of work, the character Ah But comes across a contact

in his mobile phone book that is vaguely familiar, but he simply could not recall any details about this “friend”. This prompts him to flip through his contact list with six hundred entries. What he finds are more names that he is unable to easily recognise or remember. After a long search, he finally recalls that this “friend” is a business associate that he met at a meeting. It is one of those contacts that wouldn’t be missed if it didn’t exist in his address book. So he deletes it. This action invokes a chain reaction of offloading (Figure 3.2). All the phonebook entries, SMS messages received, old emails, MSN contact list, chat histories, files and documents from previous jobs, unmarked CD-R’s that have sat on the desk for ages, packaging of electronic toys, clothes in the closet that were never worn, are all suitable candidates for this cleansing operation. Many of these things did not exist one or two decades ago, and we are probably unaware of how many objects we possess. Those of us who live in the city seem to simply carry too much baggage. Whilst we spend a great deal of time collecting and maintaining these objects, more often than not, they add little to the quality of our lives. Instead, we frequently become slaves to them.

Ah But also owns a lot of electronic gadgets (Figure 3.3). In several of the episodes, his flight carrier mishandles his PSP game console and his computer during one of his trips.³ He is at a loss, and his plane trip, all of a sudden becomes very long and boring. However, this also prompts him to start paying attention to what is happening around him, and to other people. On his way back, he *invented* a way to kill time, which is to start talking to people. In another episode, he breaks his leg, and is forced to really slow down his pace in the city.⁴ Compared to how he used to just breeze through the day, he now has to crawl along, but finds it interesting because of how much more he actually sees now (Figure 3.1.1). In a

3. 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 12 & 18-22.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

Figure 3.2: Ah But emptying his trash. From 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 35.

現代旅行 求生裝備

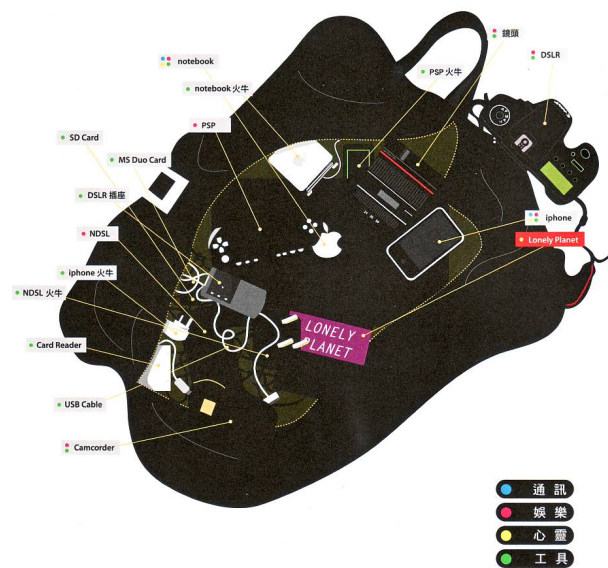


Figure 3.3: Ah But's bag, like most city dwellers, is full of electronic gadgets. From 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 12.



Ah But slowing down because of foot injury. From 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 25.

similar incident, he is sitting in his home, reflecting on how to continue his not-to-work plan.⁵ He remembers that someone once told him that if he gets worried, he should just close his eyes and listen to his inner voice and anxiety. He tries that, but could not quite figure out his uneasiness. Instead, in the moments of darkness when his eyes are closed, he experiences a mini-orchestra of sounds from his surroundings: a motor whirling inside the fridge, the TV blasting from next door, the tiny but ever-present fan noise from the computer, the engine sound roaring from the streets below, the flushing resonating through the pipes, gi-gi noise radiating from the fluorescent tube, etc. Again, slowing down and allowing the senses to reconnect to our surroundings allows us to see and hear so much more.

One of the central themes of *Lonely Planet* is Ah But's plan to not work. He stresses that his scheme is not against working, but just not to work. Its main goal is for us not to be defined by our work, but to create our own ways of living. Ah But's plan to not work is a way for him to reinvent his own life, through a rethinking of his own priorities. This is analogous to Hopper's discussion of a homogenised global culture, which is reflected in the fact that towns and cities across the industrialised world are looking increasingly alike.⁶

Wong's work can be considered as providing guidance on how to cope with the indifference that we encounter all too often in our city lives. Ultimately he is an optimist, believing that his comic strip can one day change the world.

5. 黃照達, *Lonely Planet*, 38-9.

6. Hopper, *Rebuilding Communities in an Age of Individualism*, Chapter 2.

3.1.2 Leung Chi-Wo, Warren (梁志和)

Warren Leung Chi-Wo is a photographer and mixed-media artist.⁷ He was born in Hong Kong in 1968, was educated at the Hong Kong Chinese University, and is now based in this city. The city has been a consistent theme in his work. From *City Cookie*, *The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island*, to *Asia's World City*, his works frequently reflect on the changing environment, and his response to those changes.⁸

City Cookie was Leung's long running (1999-2003) collaboration with artist Sara Wong Chi-Hang. This work explored our perception of the city skyline. Against the backdrop of man-made buildings and skyscrapers, outlines of the sky that we now see in the city have become *man-made*. These man-made skies started as vast and boundless stretches of canvas, and were slowly eroded to patches of odd shapes (Figure 3.4). These patches of sky have become quite detached from our daily living, as we really have to make an effort to see them. The sky is now just the negative space of our city. Leung and Wong made cookies based on the shapes of these negative spaces, and invited the audience to eat them (Figure 3.5). The audience would experience first-hand an accelerated corrosion of the city's sky. This rather light-hearted approach to a rather serious topic invited the viewer to reflect upon their perception of city living, and to share their own experiences.

In addition to *City Cookie*, Leung used 'man-made skies' in many other explorations of city living. Coincidentally, Lisa Rienermann from Germany also used this topic in studies of her own environment. One of her series interpreted these skies, through constructing a set of alpha-

7. Leung Chi Wo, last accessed Feb 5, 2012, <http://www.leungchiwo.com/>; Leung Chi Wo - [art]attack 28, last access Feb 6, 2012, <http://choochootv.com/choochootv-shows-/artattack/252-leung-chi-wo-artattack-28>.

8. *City Cookie*, last accessed Apr 1, 2012, <http://www.leungchiwo.com/cookie/cookie.html>; *The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island*, last accessed Apr 1, 2012, <http://www.leungchiwo.com/kangaroo/1.html>; *Asia's World City*, last accessed Apr 1, 2012, http://www.leungchiwo.com/Asia_City/main.html.

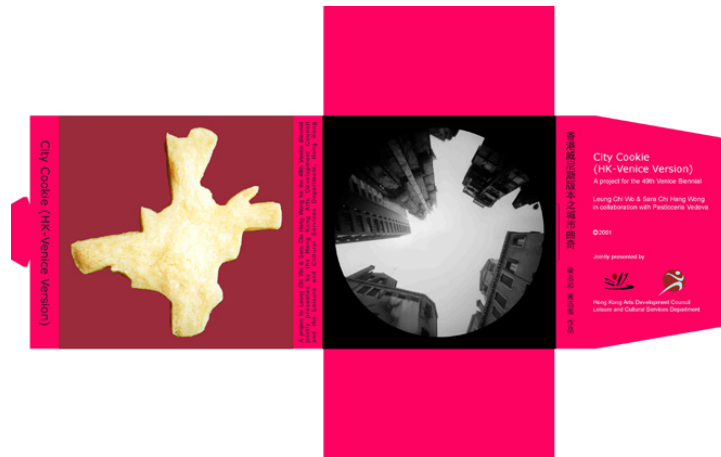


Figure 3.4: Package design of Leung and Wong's City Cookie (HK-Venice Version) for the Venice Biennale in 2001. From <http://www.leungchiwo.com/cookie/cookie.html>.



Figure 3.5: City Cookie being served as a performance, with greetings "Would you like a piece of sky?". Left: Hong Kong, 2000; right: Venice, 2001. Photos from <http://www.leungchiwo.com/cookie/cookie.html>.



Figure 3.6: Rienermann's *type the sky*. From <http://www.lisarienermann.com/index.php?/project/type-the-sky/>.

bets from the negative spaces defined by the city's buildings (Figure 3.6).

In *The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island*, Leung developed a city based on a photo he took at Smythe Lane in Melbourne's Chinatown.⁹ He began by cutting a piece of kangaroo skin into a city the shape of the sky in the photo. In the subsequent "development" of the city that lasted six hours, he cut, built, added, modified and shaved the skin using his own hands and some tools. The entire scene was captured on video, and was edited into a six-minute clip by cutting and reconnecting very short segments. Hairs on the kangaroo skin were slowly removed, and replaced with man-made objects. Shots were not disconnected, much like how our cities are developed. The speed at which this imaginary city evolved was arguably Leung's reflection on his own expe-

9. cwwleung, *The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island*, 2003, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEpF5ALm2F0>.



Figure 3.7: Video capture of Leung's *The Great Development of Smythe Kangaroo Island*. Video from <http://www.leungchiwo.com/kangaroo/1.html>.

rience. Again, he used a somewhat tongue-in-cheek approach to discuss his rapidly changing surroundings.

His more recent work, *Asia's World City*, was a more direct response to a slogan that the Hong Kong Tourism Development Council promoted at the time.¹⁰ He solicited ideas from people through email, about their wishes for 'Asia's World City', a branding used to depict Hong Kong. What did people want this city to be? A wish list was compiled, and among these wishes, a list of twelve was chosen as "unaccomplished" or unfulfilled. These were printed on banners, in a similar style to street banners used by political parties, and were displayed around Hollywood Road in the Central district of Hong Kong. Through this exercise, Leung explored Hong Kong people's desires for the future. Hong Kong did not need to be more internationally cosmopolitan, but rather, a city that is more liveable.

¹⁰. *Asia's World City*.



Figure 3.8: No. 20 of Leung's *Asia's World City*, shown opposite the Schoeni gallery in Central. Photo from http://www.leungchiwo.com/Asia_City/main.html.



Figure 3.9: No. 32 of Leung's *Asia's World City*, shown at Kinwick Centre. Photo from http://www.leungchiwo.com/Asia_City/main.html.

3.1.3 John Fung Kin-Chung (馮建中)

John Fung was born in Madagascar in the 1950s, and moved to mainland China with his family when he was 13. He is a photographer who works in Hong Kong, and who started exhibiting his works in the 1980s. Similar to Leung, his works also use the city as a backdrop. Fung is interested in discussing the inequality of living in a city, and the poverty associated with it. He uses his creativity to maintain the dignity of the underprivileged, in an effort to fight against the almost slave like routines of city living. The artist is described in an extract below from the catalogue of an auction that included his works.¹¹

John Fung Kin-Chung is a photographer who produces photography of iconic urban vistas which include Hong Kong's skyscrapers and the mid-level escalator which is the longest outdoor escalator in the world. He manipulates the images to create disjointed kaleidoscopic patterns representing the discomfort and sensory overload of living in Hong Kong.

Fung's images are guided by a strong pursuit of fundamental rights that he believes all of us should enjoy, namely freedom and the ability to choose. According to one critic, his photos are splendid like images from kaleidoscopes, yet are formed by broken fragments of our city architectures. They are baggage of the cities' history, and products of utilitarianism. They reflect the turbulence of the surrealistic cosmopolitan, enrage our emotion with schizophrenic intensity. Yet their existence is only as real as bubbles.¹²

Although both Fung and Leung use the city as a backdrop for their works, the latter examines the relationships between nature and city

11. Sotheby, *Sotheby's Catalogue: Contemporary Asian Art, April 2009, Hong Kong, 2009*.

12. 蔡正鵬 Tsai Cheng Peng, 樓花 幻影--馮建中當代影像展 (09/04 10/03) - 趴客網, last access Mar 12, 2012, <http://begforparty.com/my/blog/Artscharity/26140>.



Figure 3.10: "2006-07-01, 15:19:26" by John Fung. Photo from http://www.asianculturalcouncil.org.hk/en/welcome/features_detail/20.



Figure 3.11: "2011-02-27, 12:46:43" by John Fung. Photo from http://www.asianculturalcouncil.org.hk/en/welcome/features_detail/20.



Figure 3.12: "John snail" by Slinkachu that wandered the streets of London. Photos from <http://slinkachu.com/inner-city-snail>.

structures through the study of positive and negative spaces, and their interactions in various perspectives. Fung, on the other hand, injects a lot more of his energy, emotion and imagination into his work. He adamantly challenges the inequalities in city living, and laments the poverty and slave-like conditions of many city dwellers. In his works, even insignificant and ordinary people can maintain their dignity.

3.1.4 Slinkachu

Slinkachu, a UK-based artist, is interested in responding to the rapidly changing city. In his work, *Inner City Snail*, he painted a name and other graphics or graffiti on the shells of these slow moving creatures, and let them roam, or rather unhurriedly crawl, through the streets of London (Figure 3.12), providing an interesting contrast with the extreme pace of living in our modernised cities.¹³ However, this small creature, could only be appreciated by people who pay keen attention to their surroundings.

According to Aldredge, while other better-known street artists like Banksy rely on shock value, cleverness, and overt political statement, Slinkachu's miniature street tableaux and photographs convey more com-

13. Slinkachu, *Slinkachu - Inner City Snail*, last accessed Apr 22, 2012, <http://slinkachu.com/inner-city-snail>.

plex narratives about the human condition. His art is often witty, but never clever for cleverness' sake.

He grew up in a small town on the south coast of Devon. As a boy, he played with bugs and creatures in the yard behind his house. One defining moment that he describes in an interview tells of him watching a stag beetle crawling down a city street. The unusual sight of the beetle in the city made the artist wonder if such insects were actually rare, or merely unnoticed in the busy flurry of day to day urban life. This intriguing idea of the *unseen* compelled Slinkachu to try his hand at creating his own small urban dramas.

Slinkachu's works have a dual existence. They are both street art installations, and photography projects. He often leaves his miniature scenes behind for observant pedestrians to find. It could be days, or weeks before anyone would notice them, if at all. The existence of these street scenes is a bit like that of ours. Each of us is just one tiny person amongst millions. Fortunately, Slinkachu's works also continue to live on as large-scale photographs and wonderful book projects. His photographic techniques are vital: the close-ups make you feel like a participant, while the far-away shots leave you feeling like a spectator.¹⁴

His miniatures have a power that resonates beyond their small size. His works offer viewers a deeper experience that doesn't fade once the thrill of discovery has passed.¹⁵ In the foreword of a book, Will Self states that these artworks are "incontestably grand: alienation, suffering, survival: the collision between vulnerable human flesh and the materials – glass, steel, concrete – that constitute the modern metropolis."¹⁶ In plac-

14. Slinkachu, *THE Q&A: SLINKACHU, ARTIST, MINIATURIST* | *More Intelligent Life*, last accessed Apr 22, 2012, <http://moreintelligentlife.com/blog/gary-moskowitz/qa-slinkachu-artist-miniaturist>.

15. Michelle Aldredge, *Little People in the City: The Street Art of Slinkachu* | *gwarlingo*, last accessed Apr 22, 2012, 9, <http://www.gwarlingo.com/2011/street-art-of-slinkachu/>.

16. Slinkachu, *Little People in the City: The street art of Slinkachu* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2008), 6.



Figure 3.13: Example of Slinkachu's work: *Dreaming of packing it all in*. Photo from http://slinkachu.com/i/u/little-people/1_dreams.jpg.

ing his miniatures within a real urban context, Self argues, "Slinkachu engages, inevitable, with a range of secondary and socio-culturally defined responses... Slinkachu's (art) is sophisticated."

In his own words, Slinkachu said he was "interested in little things, but not for miniatures' sake... I like my things to be melancholy, like loneliness, and people lost and alone."¹⁷ He also "likes the idea that almost no one sees my work. Because we all ignore, intentionally or unintentionally much of what surrounds us in a city."¹⁸

But are these great cities of ours as sturdy and stout as they appear? History seems to show otherwise, as wars and natural disasters have destroyed great cities with ease. The scale of Slinkachu's work focuses our attention on city dwellers' smallness; loneliness; neglect of each other, and tendency to wander off. My work takes a similar approach, beginning with observations of enormous structures from the city, such as roads and bridges, then, through a process of abstraction, shrinking them to a scale that we can more easily relate to. My aim is to promote the viewer to reappraise their surroundings, and to rethink their rela-

17. Slinkachu, *THE Q&A: SLINKACHU, ARTIST, MINIATURIST* | *More Intelligent Life*.

18. Wikipedia, *Slinkachu* - Wikipedia, last accessed Apr 22, 2012, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slinkachu>.

tionship with the city that they live in.

3.2 Summary

The artists reviewed in this chapter have been selected because of their interests in the exploration of city living. They use different media and different angles to explore and, in a sense, challenge how our daily living has become dehumanised. Wong's focus on exploring his discontent with city living deepened my research in some of this phenomenon. Similarly, Leung and Fung's work broadened my mastery of adopting architectural forms in the discussion of city issues. In addition, Leung's work intensified my understanding of rapid changes in city living and people-oriented city living. Slinkachu's work, on the other hand, strengthened my conviction in using small-scaled objects to emphasis topics that are of interest to city inhabitants, and to bring awareness to viewers of my work.

Each of them has his own unique background, motivation, beliefs, conviction and ideology. Yet all of them share the same keen observation and enthusiasm, and their works enrich the discussion on this broad area, and form a backdrop to my own research.

Chapter 4

Cultural Linkage

It is difficult to discuss a person's work without looking at their cultural background. Whilst I have very little background in philosophy, I found that in researching cultural linkages in my work, that there were many similarities between how Chinese philosophers view the world, and my own areas of interest. In particular, I found the ideas presented by Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (莊子) thought provoking and in this chapter, I will highlight the areas that I believe are relevant.

4.1 Laozi

Tau Teh Ching, *Dao De Jing*, or simply *Laozi* is a classic Chinese text, whose name comes from the opening words of its two sections: *Dao*, “way” and *de*, “virtue”.¹ Although this book contains merely some five thousand words in eighty-one brief chapters, its thoughts are fundamental to Taoism, and strongly influenced other schools of thought in China.

Dao De Jing describes *Dao* as the source and ideal of all existence. It is unseen, but not transcendent, immensely powerful yet supremely humble, and being the root of all things. According to the text, humans

1. *Tao Te Ching* - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, last accessed Dec 9, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching.

have no special place within the Dao, being just one of its many manifestations. People have desires and free will, and thus are able to alter their own nature. Many act unnaturally, thus upsetting the natural balance of the Dao. *The Dao De Jing* intends to advise students on how to return to their natural state, in harmony with Dao.

Technology may bring about a false sense of progress. The answer provided by Laozi is not the rejection of technology, but is instead seeking the calm state of *wu wei*, or being free from desires. *Wu wei* (無爲), literally "non-action" or "not acting", is a central concept of the *Dao De Jing*. The concept of *wu wei* is multifaceted, and reflected in the words' multiple meanings, even in English translation. It can mean "not doing anything", "not forcing", "not acting" in the theatrical sense, "creating nothingness", "acting spontaneously", and "flowing with the moment."

It is a concept used to explain *zi ran* (自然), or harmony with the Dao. Laozi used the term broadly with simplicity and humility as key virtues, often in contrast to selfish action. On a political level, it means avoiding such circumstances as war, harsh laws and heavy taxes. Some Daoists see a connection between *wu wei* and esoteric practices, such as "sitting in oblivion", or emptying the mind of bodily awareness and thought found in Zhuangzi.²

4.1.1 From Macro to Micro

Laozi's philosophy starts with macro views, and then pinpoints particular issues using micro examinations.³ The effectiveness of this worldview is as a result of Laozi summarising all his experiences of the real world, and then attaching them to the framework of Dao. Dao can be seen as a human's inner voice and driving force, and a theory that suits

2. Laozi - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, last accessed Apr 1, 2012, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi>).

3. 陳鼓應, 老莊新論, 再版 (香港: 中華書局, 2009), 3.

our lives' needs and desires.

One example is how Laozi explores and discusses the role of Dao in the universe through the passages below.⁴ In his view, Dao is a physical being, and has been in existence before all other matters and beings. In fact, all matters originated from Dao.

(conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven
and earth;

(conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.

[chapter 1]

...

all things under heaven sprang from It as existing (and named);
that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named).

[chapter 40]

...

the Tào produced One; One produced Two; Two produced
Three; Three produced All things. [chapter 42]

...

All things are produced by the Tào, and nourished by its out-
flowing operation. They receive their forms according
to the nature of each, and are completed according to
the circumstances of their condition. Therefore all things
without exception honour the Tào, and exalt its outflow-
ing operation.

This honouring of the Tào and exalting of its operation is not
the result of any ordination, but always a spontaneous
tribute.

4. Ibid., 7.

Thus it is that the Tào produces (all things), nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurses them, completes them, matures them, maintains them, and overspreads them.

It produces them and makes no claim to the possession of them; it carries them through their processes and does not vaunt its ability in doing so; it brings them to maturity and exercises no control over them;— this is called its mysterious operation. [chapter 51]⁵

Laozi begins by stating his macro view of Dao as the origin of everything. It is also the “primordial natural force”, and has inexhaustible power and creativity. The fact that everything in existence flourishes is an embodiment and proof of the power of Dao. He then explains through his own observation and personal experiences, and attaches Dao to our everyday living, thus going from a macro-view to micro views. The “one”, “two” and “three” in chapter 42 describe Dao’s journey of creation. Then, as described in chapter 51, Dao nurtured and nourished these newly created matters by embedding Itself within them. Through observing the fact that all earthly things thrive in eternal cycles, we can see the endless vitality of Dao.

I aim to use the same macro and micro approach to examine the remote relationships between city dwellers and our surroundings. Do we want to have more personal relationships? Are we still capable of more personal relationships? These are some of the questions that I hope can be effectively explored using this approach.

5. James Legge, *EBook of Tao Teh King, by Lao-Tze* (The Project Gutenberg, February 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/216/216-h/216-h.htm>.

4.1.2 The Dao

Dao is the central theme of Laozi's work. One of the possible interpretations of the Dao is that it is "forever existing, but does not stay in a fixed state. It is constantly changing, but will not vanish as it evolves."⁶ Most of my works involve sections of lines, congregated together to form loops and loops of "road". There are no specific beginning and end points for the viewers to latch on to. They are free to choose where to start their journey, and where and when to end. Their experience is entirely up to themselves, and one person's journey could be quite different from another. So although the work itself does not physically change, at the same time, it is ever transforming. Based on the viewers' personal experience, and their particular state of being during the encounter, how they react to the work is likely to be different every time.

4.1.3 The Opposing States

Laozi believed that everything is forever changing between antithetical states.⁷ No state will last forever, and over time, one state will morph into its complete opposite and then back. This is like the swinging of a pendulum that will never end and cannot be stopped. Why does Laozi place such a strong focus on the transformation between opposing states? This is because he believed everything is created and defined through this opposing relationship. Therefore in order to gain an understanding of any subject matter, one not only has to study its positive side, but also its negative side. Only through the thorough examination of both can one gain a complete understanding of the subject matter. In fact, he placed particular emphasis on the study of the weak side. While human nature and society in general encourage becoming strong, first, and tall,

6. 陳鼓應, *老莊新論*, 6.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

Laozi advocated to be weak, be last, stay under, and most importantly, do nothing. The doctrine of do nothing, or inaction, can be difficult to understand. One possible interpretation is given on page 55 of *The Wisdom of Laotse* 老子的智慧.⁸ If viewed in the context of science, inaction could mean to use the force of nature to achieve ones objectives, often with the greatest efficiency. Zhuangzi illustrated this well with a metaphor. If a man has to feed a fire by adding logs by hand, there is a limit to how many logs can be added. If on the other hand, the fire can be spread by nature or by itself, then the process is continuous.

I choose to use a small scale, to reflect upon our enormous city. As Laozi suggested, by focusing on the *weak* side, we can in fact be better equipped to attract attention from the *strong* side.

4.1.4 Be Still

In addition to the cyclic development of states and matters, Laozi also postulated that stillness is the ultimate root of all beings. Here is the translated text of chapter 16 by Red Pine.⁹

Let limits be empty

the center be still

Ten thousand things rise

we watch them return

Creatures without number

all return to their roots

Return to their roots to be still

to be still to revive

to revive to endure

8. 林語堂譯 Lin Yutang tran., *The Wisdom of Laotse* 老子的智慧, vol. 下冊 (台北市: 正中書局, 1994).

9. Bill Porter, *Lao-Tzu's Taoteching*, 3rd Revised (Copper Canyon Press, 2009), 32.

Knowing how to endure is wisdom
 not knowing is to suffer in vain

 Knowing how to endure is to be all-embracing
 all embracing means impartial
 impartial means the king
 the king means Heaven
 Heaven means the Way

 And the Way means long life
 life without trouble.

It is evident that Laozi stressed stillness as the root of everything, where all should return, to revive, and to endure. The development of this view was influenced by the historic backdrop of the time.¹⁰ During his time, around 6th century BC according to Chinese traditions, he witnessed the ruling class's indulgence in debauchery, and the heavy taxation imposed on the people. He advocated returning to the root, allowing one to be devoid of mere sensual stimulation. He gave this warning in chapter 12.¹¹

The five basic colours can astound the eye
 The five sounds of music can stun or deafen the ear
 The five tastes may dull or spoil the palate
 ...
 Valuable things and products, hard to get, can impede their
 owner's progress
 So the wise man is concerned with his navel and belly before
 his eyes

In this context, “belly” refers to the inner-self, and “eyes” the world of matter through our sense experiences.

10. 陳鼓應, 老莊新論, 37.

11. Tormod Kinnes, *Tao Te Ching - English Version on The Gold Scales*, last accessed Dec 9, 2011, <http://oaks.nvg.org/re3ra3.html>.

Laozi advocated quietness and stillness as a means to anchor oneself in life's turbulence. His stillness, however, is not static, and does not equate to stagnation, but rather is calm and ready for action.

Although these passages were likely to have been written over two thousand years ago, what we face in today's city living is indeed very similar. We are being bombarded by different forms of stimuli and collectively we indulge in materialistic consumption. Can stillness be used to prompt us city dwellers to reflect on the non-people-orientated nature of city living? Stillness, and how it interacts with movement and motion, is a powerful tool that I intend to explore in my work.

4.1.5 Weak and Not To Compete

Laozi believed the development of Dao is a weak process, but is never-ending.¹² The fact that it is *weak* does not impede its growth. Rather, this weakness is what makes Dao so pervading, so effective, and most of all, so natural. Water, one of Laozi's favourite subjects as metaphor, is the weakest and softest, yet it is capable and so effective in puncturing through the hardest rock through dripping. In addition to staying weak, Laozi also believed one should stay low, and not compete, again, like water. By staying low, one is able to accept everything. In his view, not to compete does not mean not to do anything. On the contrary, he believed we should all try our best in what we do, but in a way that benefits all things. Our behaviour should follow what is natural, and we should not relish personal gains. Below are the original passages from chapter 76.

When people are born they are soft and supple when they
perish they are hard and stiff
When plants shoot forth they are soft and tender when they
die they are withered and dry

¹². 陳鼓應, 老莊新論, 39.

Thus it is said the hard and strong are followers of death the
soft and weak are followers of life

...

We aim for bigger, taller, faster, newer and brighter things in the city, but these are really very fragile qualities. In my work, I use tiny and brittle porcelain wires to depict the vast and seemingly indestructible city structures, highlighting the fragility of our city living.

4.2 Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi is the second book that laid the foundation of Daoist philosophy and religious tradition. To Chinese scholars of the past years, this text was concerned about escaping from societal pressure, and on to a path of self-reflection and freedom.¹³ Its author of the same name, Zhuangzi, has been credited with many original insights into human nature, and the nature of the cosmos. Compared to the Daoist's first text *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* is written with a very different approach, using many different literal styles, including narratives, poems, and very short prose essays. It also uses metaphors and story-telling extensively. Whilst *Laozi* often presents and analyses its views and ideas in a very direct and descriptive manner, *Zhuangzi* would hint at its position through narration, rhetoric and poetry.

While both Laozi and Zhuangzi based their writings on Dao, their focus and presentations of this central idea differ quite significantly.¹⁴ Overall, Laozi places greater emphasis on the universality and ontology of Dao. He valued the breadth of this universal principal, and its properties of do-nothing, not-to-compete, stay weak and stay-low. Zhuangzi,

¹³. Harold Roth, "Zhuangzi," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2008).

¹⁴. 陳鼓應, 老莊新論, 268.

on the other hand, was more concerned about one's inner self, and state of mind. He longed for the elevation of our state of mind, and the liberation of one's self.

The discussion of *big* is what interests me the most about Zhuangzi, and this is also the central theme of this book.¹⁵ The first paragraph of the first passage, *Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease*, is as follows.¹⁶

In the Northern Ocean there is a fish, the name of which is Kun - I do not know how many li in size. It changes into a bird with the name of Peng, the back of which is (also) - I do not know how many li in extent. When this bird rouses itself and flies, its wings are like clouds all round the sky. When the sea is moved (so as to bear it along), it prepares to remove to the Southern Ocean.

It then goes on to describe the vastness of this creature, and uses comparisons between the smallest and the largest, the longest lived goddess in the legend and the mushroom that lasts but a day, and the flotation between a straw on water droplets and a large boat in the ocean, to start a discussion on size and the comparison of scale.

In Zhuangzi, there are in general three variations of size. One is physically big, for example a large boat, a large tree or a large column. The second is comparatively big, where large is based on something smaller. The third kind is absolutely big. It encompasses all the spiritual greatness that is boundless, such as virtue and benevolence. One modern scholar, Wu Yi, interprets this discussion of size as a transformation or evolution between forms.¹⁷ Everything big started from being small. This physical growth process, however, is usually not that smooth, but is full

15. 吳怡, 新譯莊子內篇解義 (臺北市: 三民書局, 2000), 14.

16. Donald J. Sturgeon, *Zhuangzi : Inner Chapters : Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease - Chinese Text Project*, last accessed Dec 28, 2011, <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/enjoyment-in-untroubled-ease>.

17. 吳怡, 新譯莊子內篇解義, 12-19.

of surprises and difficulties. During times like these, the object needs to *follow* (順 *shùn*) the development, and follow the environment. On the other hand, to transcend to being comparatively big, one has to *forget* (忘 *wàng*), meaning to make a breakaway from the confinement and limitations we place on ourselves. Only then could we be free from being small, and gain the truth. Finally, the absolutely big is basically the Dao. To get to know it, one has to *digest* (化 *huà*), and to absorb Dao into one's being. The different aspects of transformation between sizes, embodiments and ideas can all be viewed and discussed via these frameworks. In the natural world, when the physical form of organisms develop and grow to a certain point, they would weaken, and become another form. Nothing is destroyed in these cycles, but merely transformations of physical forms. We humans face similar destinations, with ends, and death. We, however, are different from other beings, and are capable of transcending in spirit and wisdom. With this transformation, we can thus be free from the limitations of our physical forms. We should therefore not pay so much attention to the embodiment, because being big or small does not matter much. We can only achieve the supreme state of being truly big by *digesting* (化而大之 *huà ér dà zhī*).

The idea of nothing is slightly different between Laozi and Zhuangzi. Laozi said: "The things of this world come from something; something comes from nothing."¹⁸ Thus to Laozi, the notion of nothing is rather absolute. The world began with nothing, and crystallised into something. Nothing is therefore the ultimate source of everything. Zhuangzi's view, however, is slightly different. He saw nothing as relative. Something originated from nothing, and nothing came from *nothing nothing*, which in turn came from *nothing nothing nothing* and so on. Here is a passage from *The Adjustment of Controversies of Zhuangzi*.¹⁹

18. Porter, *Lao-Tzu's Taoteching*, Chapter 40.

19. Donald J. Sturgeon, *Zhuangzi : Inner Chapters : The Adjustment of Controversies - Chinese Text Project*, last accessed Dec 28, 2011, <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/>

Under heaven there is nothing greater than the tip of an autumn down,
and the Tai mountain is small.

There is no one more long-lived than a child which dies prematurely,
and Peng Zu did not live out his time.

The Tai mountain is huge, but when compared with the whole earth, it is just tiny. Everything is larger than what is smaller, and smaller than what is larger. Therefore Zhuangzi believed everything is small, yet everything is big. In the chapter *Floods of Autumn*, he stated the following.²⁰

Looking at them in the light of common opinion,
their being noble or mean does not depend on themselves.

Looking at them in their differences from one another,
if we call those great which are greater than others,
there is nothing that is not great,
and in the same way there is nothing that is not small.

We shall (thus) know that heaven and earth is but (as) a grain
of the smallest rice,
and that the point of a hair is (as) a mound or a mountain -
such is the view given of them by their relative size.

The notions of large or small are only a result of comparison within boundaries that we impose. Zhuangzi thus rejected the limitations of the physical being, and stated “*Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one.*” Everything in the universe is therefore from the same origin. The big needs the small to become big, and one does not dominate over the other.

adjustment-of-controversies.

20. Sturgeon, *Zhuangzi : Inner Chapters : The Adjustment of Controversies - Chinese Text Project*.

Chapter 5

Development of Studio Work

I began the development of this new series of work with a curiosity in what I perceive as the inhuman nature of city living. This is in contrast with what I refer to as human-oriented living. City living with a focus on people could be quite simple. It is about participation, about lawns where children can roam freely, about blue sky, or about public spaces where people can sit down to rest and to bond. Here, we can build connections between people, and between people and the city. With stronger relationships, we can begin to be more involved in the community.

The project aims to explore the relationships in Hong Kong and other cities, between people, and between people and the city. These relationships seem to be both closely knit and isolated. The project also aims to develop a creative language that I can use to further this discussion.

5.1 Part I – In Search of Focus Area

5.1.1 Shrinking Distances

This project started with a work titled *Shrinking Distances*, that consisted of lines that were loosely related to each other, and which was

created for an exhibition in 2006. I was interested in exploring the interpersonal relationship between people in the city. Here is an excerpt from my artist's statement:

Distance is relative. Compared to people in the past, modern city dwellers have a very different concept about what is "far". We might not give much thought to flying thousands of miles for a vacation, but we frown at walking a few blocks within our inner city. We know it takes only a bus ride to visit our friends or relatives across town, but we now seldom take the trouble. Are we too busy pondering the possibilities, that we don't bother to make the leap?

Shrinking Distances aims to bring the city closer to us, right into our palms. Can we get closer? Or, do we want to?

5.1.2 Exploration in Massiveness

I continued with developing my observations of roads and lines. Roads can connect distant places, but can also cruelly divide up neighbourhoods. Our city development often places too much emphasis on economic efficiency and speed, and ignores relationships between people; between people and their surroundings; between people and the land, and between people and events. The road became an interesting metaphor through which to explore these issues of connectedness and un-connectedness or division.

I aimed to refine my research interest, and also broaden my visual vocabulary through adding weight to my work, both visually and physically, in an effort to emphasise the massiveness of our city. I used metal plates to make circular forms, which in turn became symbolic or representative of the road. Attachments that represented buildings were



Figure 5.1: *Shrinking Distances*. A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.



Figure 5.2: *Shrinking Distances*. A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.

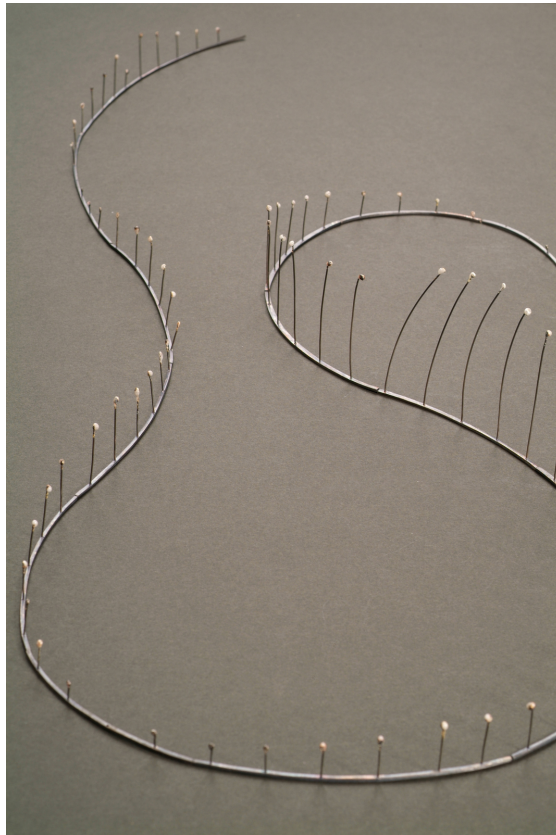


Figure 5.3: *Shrinking Distances* (detail). A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.

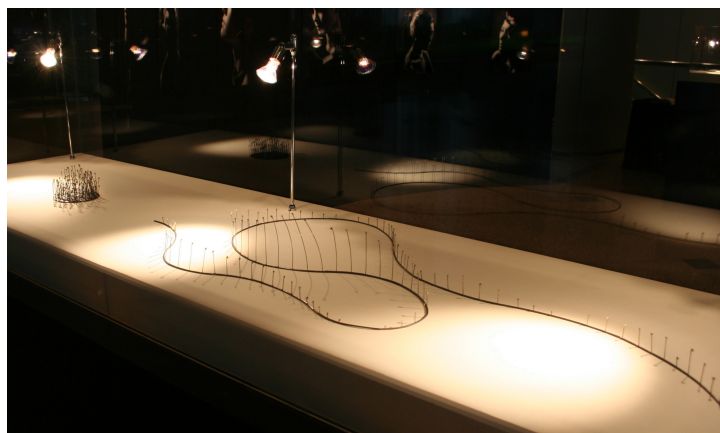


Figure 5.4: *Shrinking Distances*. A study of relationships and connections. Photo by Eva Chan.



Figure 5.5: Exploration in massiveness. Photo by author.



Figure 5.6: Exploration in massiveness. Finished pieces. Photo by Bertha Ma.

added to these forms, in order to express the integration of communities into these roads, thus creating a more complete city.

However, after comparing this work with the previous work, I realised that lightness or fragility expressed my concerns more appropriately. Under the banner of high-speed and large-scale development, humans were often the ones who were being ignored. As the city grew taller, larger and life within it faster, humans became, relatively speaking, progressively smaller, more isolated, and more lost. This perceived state of drifting and brittleness, was not represented well by structures



Figure 5.7: Exploration in massiveness. Detail of two of the pieces. Photo by Bertha Ma.

that projected a sense of thickness and sturdiness. I needed my works to be delicate, light and fragile, in order that they might better reflect the living conditions of city dwellers. This set the course for further exploration of suitable forms and ways of connecting delicate pieces to form structures, much like the building of a city by intertwining roads.

5.1.3 Roads in Metal Wires and Their Connections

The following trial pieces could be seen as a continuation of *Shrinking Distances*. I continued to explore different ways of portraying roads using wires, with the idea of ‘connection’, an important aspect of this exploration. At this stage, I used mainly metal because I found it readily formable. Connections between metal parts were weak, but overall, the structures were robust. However, overall, these pieces of work did not quite convey the feeling of fragility that I was after and further exploration of suitable materials was required.

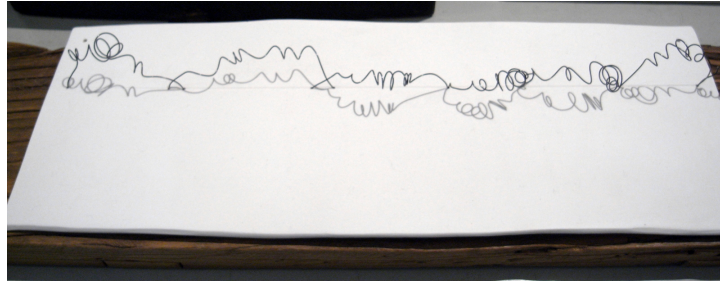


Figure 5.8: Various *Roads* in metal (2006). Photo by author.



Figure 5.9: Various *Roads* in metal (2007). Photo by author.



Figure 5.10: Various *Roads* in metal (2007). Photo by author.



Figure 5.11: A *road* in metal (2008). Photos by author.



Figure 5.12: Various *Roads* in metal (2008). Photo by author.

5.2 Part II – In Search of Materials

I wanted to use the feeling of fragility to enhance the tension in my work. To this end, I looked at how other artists approached this subject matter. Peter Root, an installation artist from the UK, builds his works with great fragility.¹ In one of his series, he used thousands and thousands of staples and stacked them up into what appears like buildings in a city (Figure 5.13). These structures rely solely on gravity to stay upright, and can be destroyed with the slightest breeze or disturbance. The whimsical cities of Jell-O® (Figure 5.14) by Liz Hickok, a San Francisco-based installation artist, are another example of how one can demonstrate the “transitory nature of human artifacts” using this perishable and uncontrollable material.² Her construction would start to decay as soon as it was built, taking on a new persona that viewers can experience directly. Photographs and videos are the only record of the work’s existence.

Sara Tse, a Hong Kong ceramic artist, uses porcelain, to convey the fragility of memory and loss through her thin and fragile works. In the

1. Peter Root - artist, last accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.peterroot.com/>.

2. Liz Hickok, last accessed Apr 1, 2012, <http://www.lizhickok.com/index.html>.

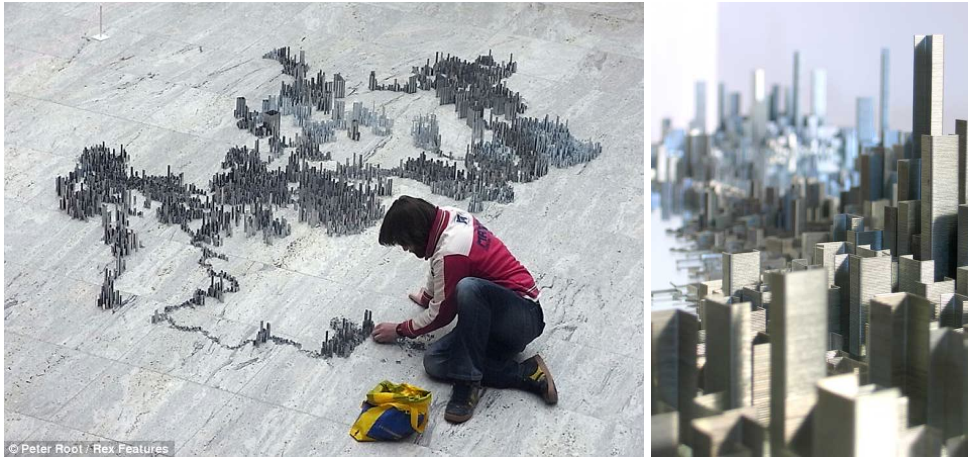


Figure 5.13: Peter Root building his buildings by stacking staples. From <http://belopotosky.com/2011/09/09/peter-roots-staple-city/> and <http://www.peterroot.com/index.php?/projects/low-rise/>.



Figure 5.14: Liz Hickok's *San Francisco in Jell-O* project. *Jell-O Mold #2* (2009). Photo from http://www.lizhickok.com/14mold_horiz.html.



Figure 5.15: Work by Sara Tse. *Dress no. 103* (2006). Photo from http://www.artbeatus.com/artists/SaraTse/S_ST_053.html.

view of the Hong Kong critic Vivian Ting, Tse's use of porcelain transformed this usually hard and durable material into a *lively brittle, of shimmering white, with relaxing chill*.³

5.2.1 Using Porcelain Wires and Fragility of the Structures

A major aim of my work is to depict the fragility of city living. To this end, I required a material and construction method that were both strong and fragile. I explored ways of building connection, and began to be more conscious of the fragility in our relationships and city living. Appreciating porcelain's contrasting qualities of strength and fragility, I began using it to make rather fine wires, and experimented with connecting these wires in different ways. After considerable experimentation, I decided to use extruded porcelain wires supported by silver links. Cities are made of glass, steel and concrete, so I considered it appropriate that

3. Vivian Wing-yan Ting 丁穎茵, "'That-has-been' Reproduction of Memories in Sara Tse's Ceramics 「此曾在」 - 淺談謝淑婷複製的回憶," *The Twenty-First Century Review* 二十一世紀評論, no. 128 (December 2011): 96.

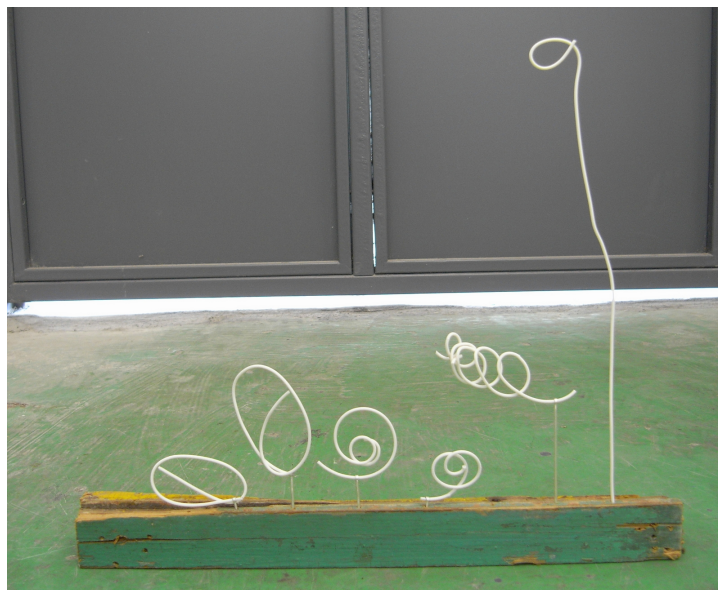


Figure 5.16: Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010). Photo by author.

my work be constructed of clay and metal. See Figure 5.16 to 5.18.

5.3 Part III – In Search of Form with Speed

At this point, materials, basic forms, and how the pieces were to be connected were beginning to be successfully resolved. The expression of speed, however, was still missing. I found a potential solution to this problem through researching traditional Chinese calligraphy and what is known as ‘wild cursive script’.

5.3.1 Wild Cursive Script (狂草)

Calligraphy is universally recognised as an art form but especially so in China where it is respected as one of the most sophisticated forms of art.⁴ Ni argues that this is partly because Chinese written language is pictographic and ideographic, rather than alphabetic. The pictorial form allows the writer much more artistic freedom when rendering the

4. Peimin 倪培民 Ni and Stephen Rowe, *Brush and Pen in Philosophical Reflection* 筆墨哲思游 (Shanghai: Orient Publishing Center, 2002), 91.

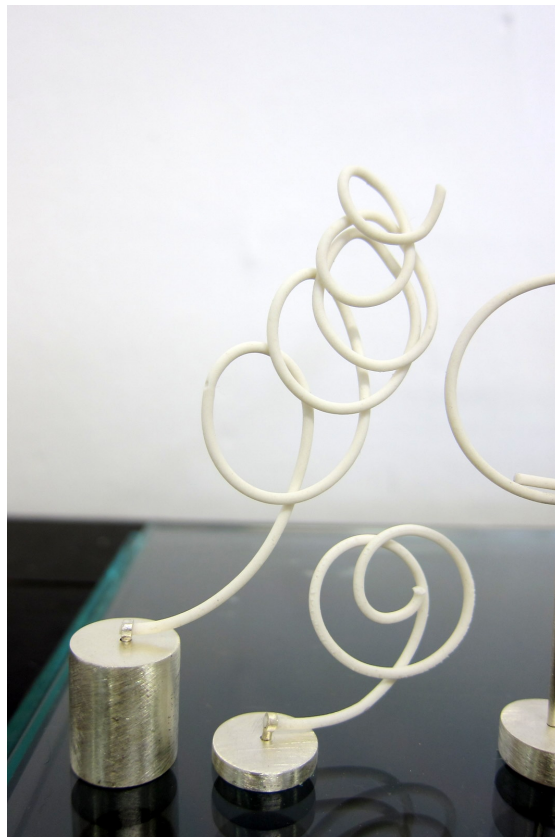


Figure 5.17: Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010), in combination with metal parts. Photo by author.

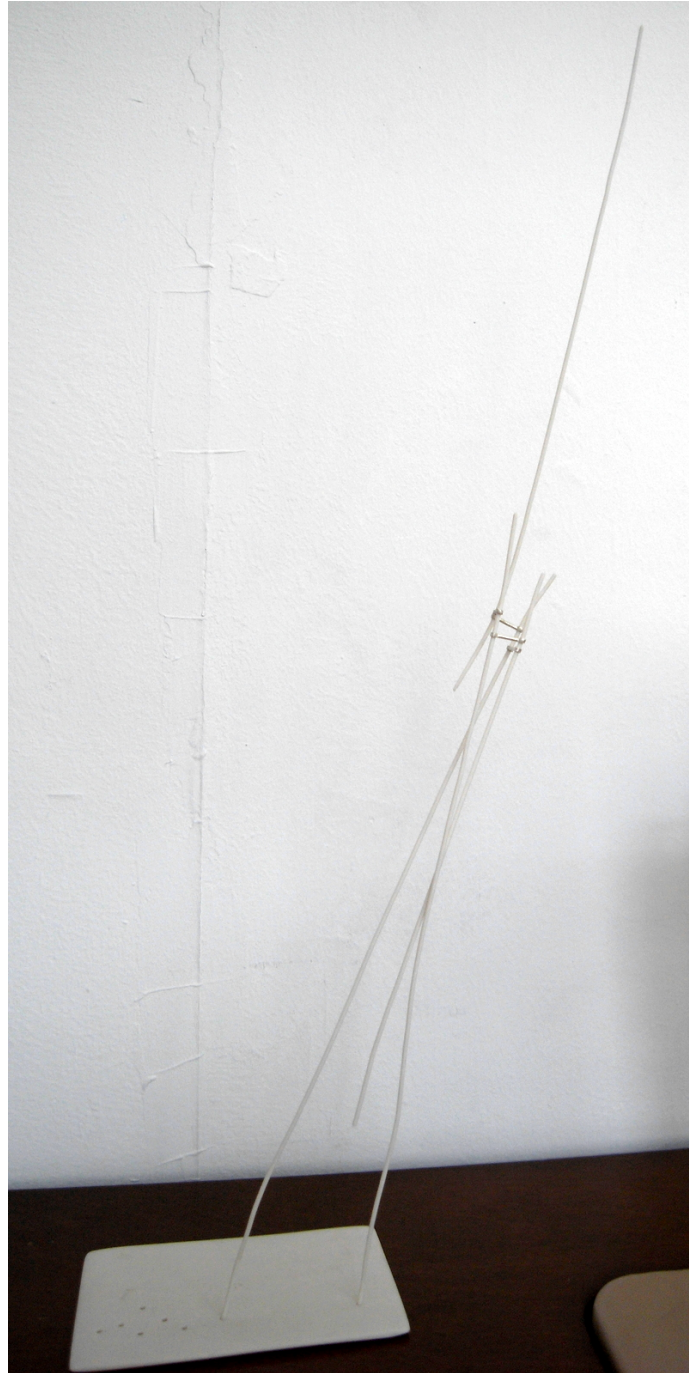


Figure 5.18: Experimenting with porcelain wires (2010), in combination with metal parts. Photo by author.

words. The tools that Chinese invented for writing; soft brush; ink and absorbent rice paper, enabled the strokes to be, among other things, thick or thin, straight or cursive, smooth or rough, and wet or dry.⁵ The *wild cursive script* (狂草 *kuáng cǎo*), created, developed and made popular in the Tang Dynasty, is a highly expressive form of calligraphy. Its main purpose shifted from a primary concern with communication to focusing on the personal expression of the writer.⁶ Through the use of cursive strokes that are hard to recognise as characters, writers escaped the limitations imposed by a practical usage of Chinese writing, and instead opted for turning wild cursive script into a pure art form.

Oracle bone script (甲骨文 *jiǎ gǔ wén*) was one of the oldest Chinese calligraphic styles (字體 *zì tǐ*). The development of calligraphy then, in approximately chronological sequence, went through Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文 *jīn wén*), seal script (篆書 *zhuàn shū*), clerical script (隸書 *lì shū*), regular script (楷書 *kǎi shū*), semi-cursive script (行書 *xíng shū*), and cursive script (草書 *cǎo shū*).⁷ These styles were developed throughout the years mostly based on technological changes, and political needs.⁸

Zhang Xu (張旭) and Huai Su (懷素) are credited with perfecting the wild cursive script about thirteen hundred years ago, during the mid-Tang Dynasty.⁹ Wang argued that although this script's development could be traced to the natural evolution of the cursive script, the co-existence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism during that era contributed to the release of its unbounded energy.¹⁰ Zhang Xu, credited

5. 倪培民 Ni and Rowe, *Brush and Pen in Philosophical Reflection* 筆墨哲思游, 91-2.

6. 王靖宪, 中國書法藝術: 第四卷 隋唐五代 (文物出版社, 1998), 158-9; 周鳳五, 華夏之美 – 書法, ed. 何寄澎 (台北市: 幼獅, 1985), 39-40.

7. 刘炳森, ed., 中国書法艺术 (北京: 中国人民大学出版社, 1994), 438.

8. 周鳳五, 華夏之美 – 書法, 35.

9. 王靖宪, 中國書法藝術: 第四卷 隋唐五代, 162-77; 周鳳五, 華夏之美 – 書法, 39-40; 单国强, 马季戈, 中国書法 (北京: 中央編譯出版社, 2008), 91-6; 吳炳銅著, 書法入門 (臺南市: 大孚, 1993), 24-6.

10. 王靖宪, 中國書法藝術: 第四卷 隋唐五代, 158-9.



Figure 5.19: Example of oracle bone script (甲骨文 *jiǎ gǔ wén*). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle_bone_script.

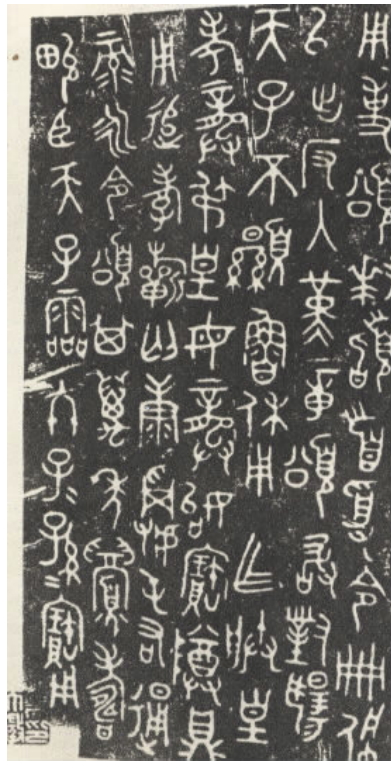


Figure 5.20: Example of Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文 *jīn wén*). Image from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:JinwenShisongding.jpg>.

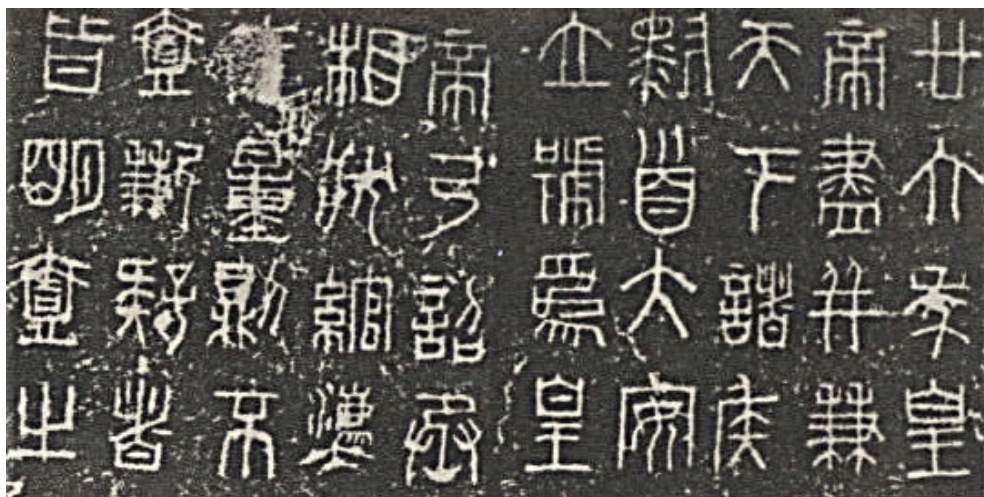


Figure 5.21: Example of seal script (篆書 *zhuàn shū*). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:XiaozhuanQinquan_sized.jpg.

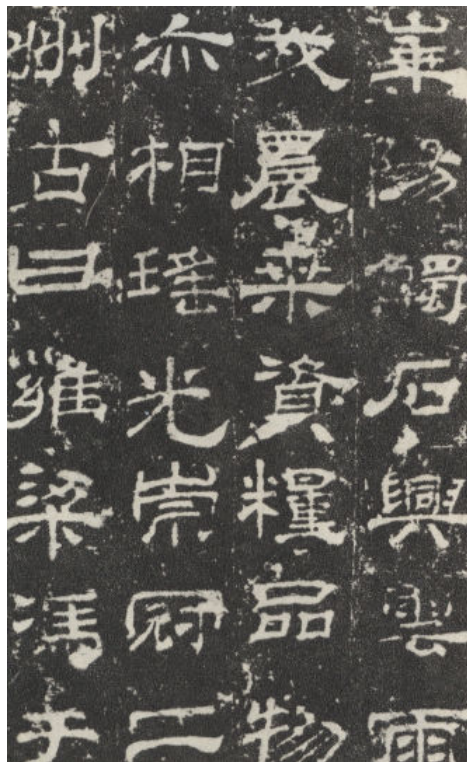


Figure 5.22: Example of clerical script (隸書 *lì shū*). Image from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:LishuHuashanmiao.jpg>.



Figure 5.23: Example of regular script (楷書 kǎi shū). Image from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:KaishuOuyangxun.jpg>.

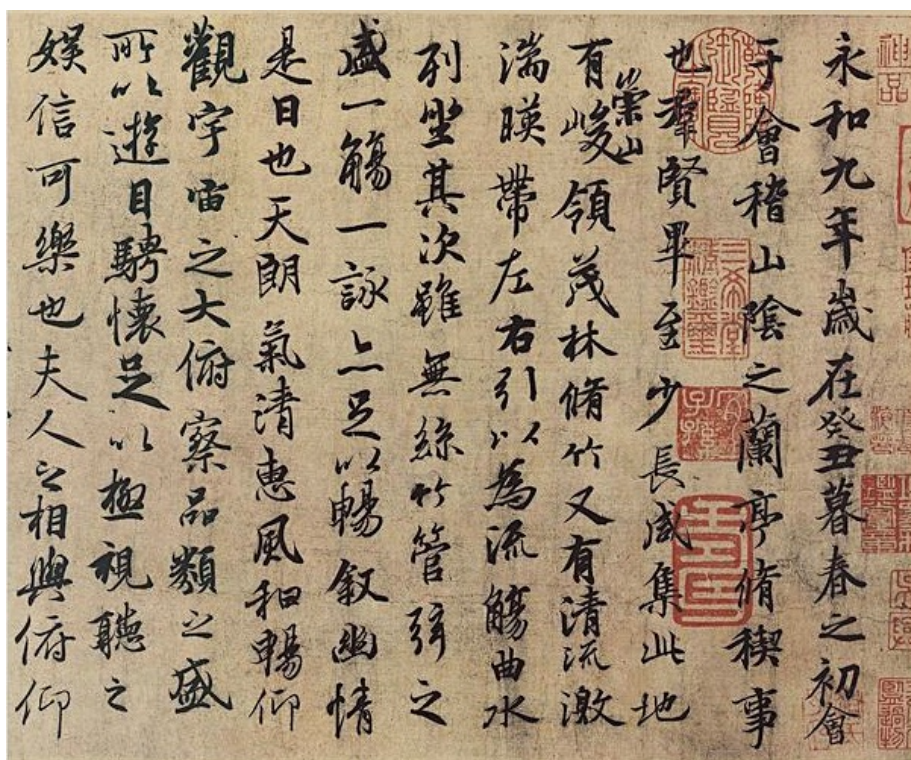


Figure 5.24: Example of semi-cursive script (行書 *xíng shū*). This particular one is from *lán tíng xù* (蘭亭序) by Wang Xizhi (王羲之). Image from http://beyond-calligraphy.com/2011/12/01/woi-wang_xizhi-p1/.

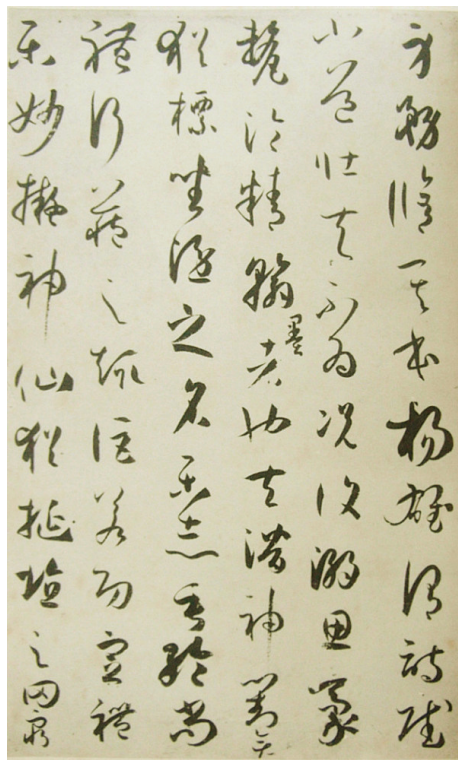


Figure 5.25: Example of cursive script (草書 cǎo shū). Image from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Treatise_On_Calligraphy.jpg.

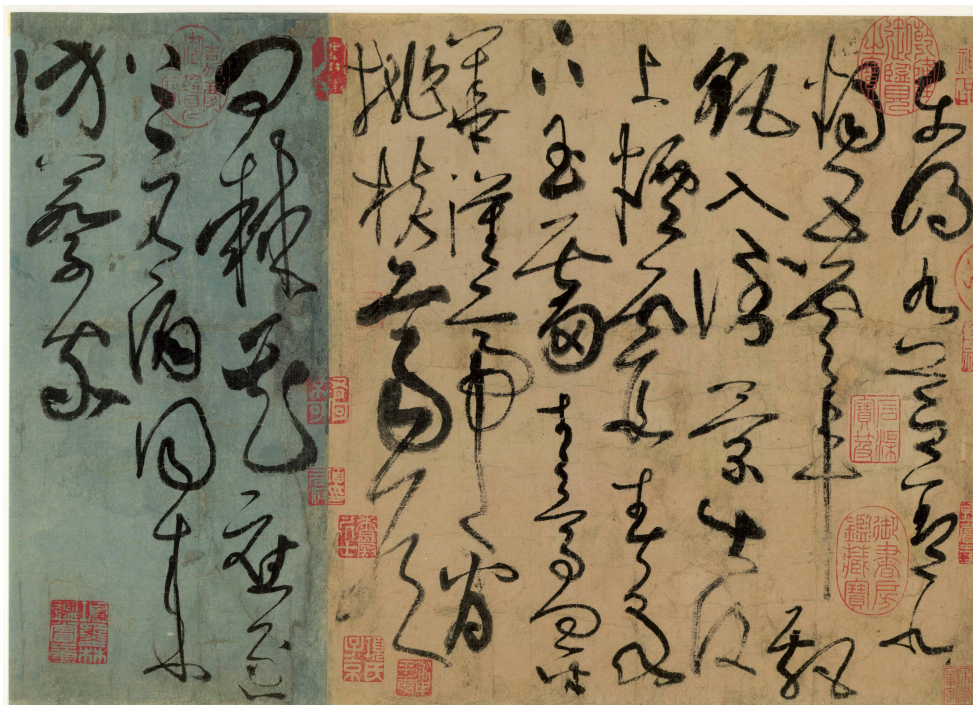


Figure 5.26: Example of wild cursive script by Zhang Xu (張旭). Image from http://blogcache.arttron.net/201104/25/527345_13037040501cbD.jpg.

with creating the wild cursive script, liked to write when he was drunk, and poured all his emotional energy into his calligraphy. The characters are linked together, and are highly unrecognisable. His strokes tended to be fuller and rounder (see Figure 5.26 for an example). Huai Su further developed this style with influence from many of his contemporaries. He also liked to write after a few drinks, using thinner brush strokes (Figure 5.27). The main concern of this form of script is dynamism, meaning the form has to flow like water.¹¹ To Chinese scholars, a regular script is like sitting, semi-cursive script like walking, while cursive script is like running. This is not to say one has to write wild cursive script in a quick manner. Instead, it should project the feeling of movement and motion, rather than being merely written quickly.

11. 賴玉光, 書道入門 — 草書篇 (台中: 大藏文化, 1985), 8-9.

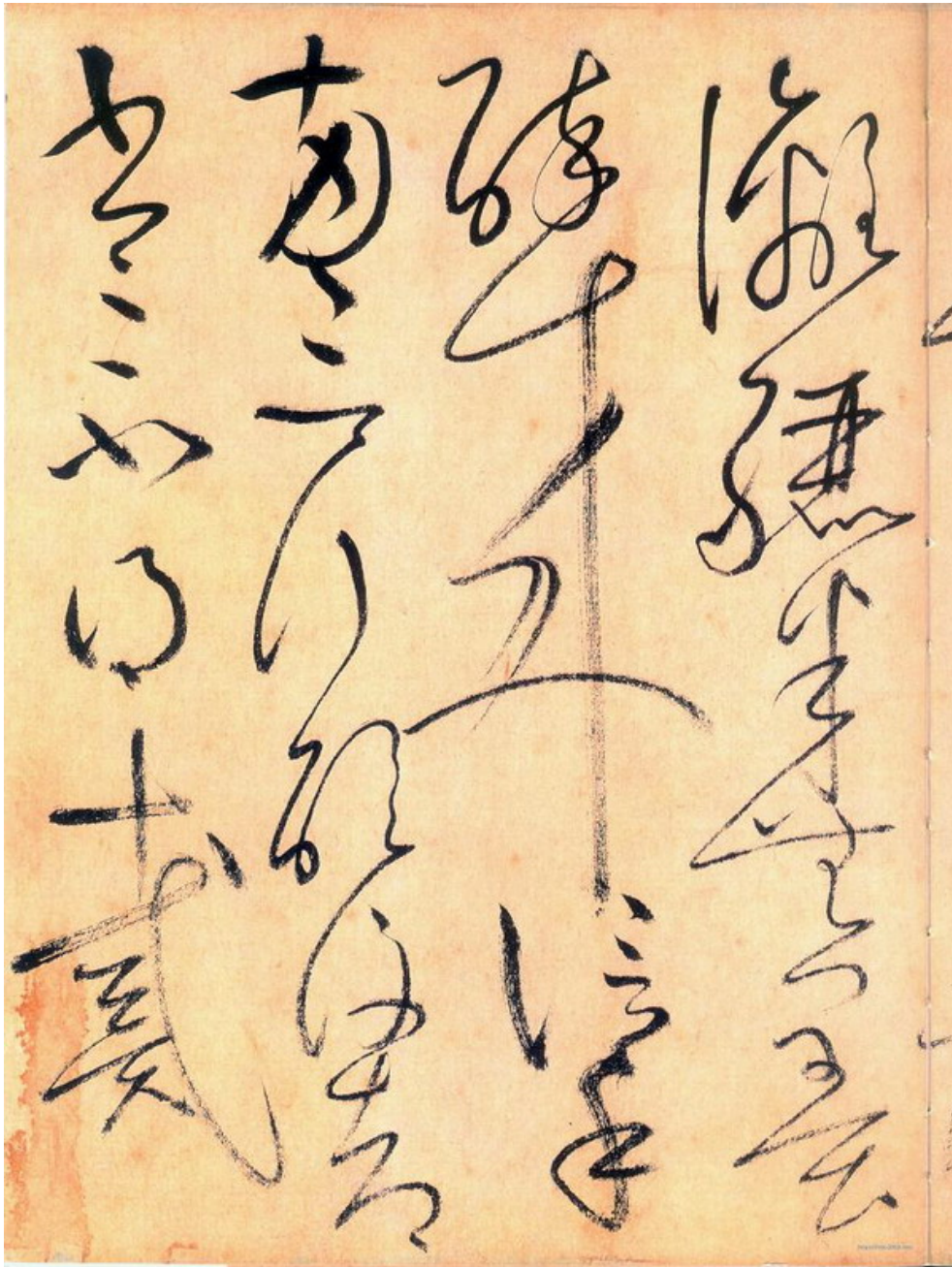


Figure 5.27: Example of wild cursive script by Huai Su (懷素). Image from <http://www.ie-tek.com/pixelpost171/index.php?showimage=9>.

Calligraphers of the cursive scripts used the character shapes as a basis, distilled the dynamism and essence of lines, and created an art form that is highly expressive.¹² In fact, many Chinese traditional art forms such as painting and seal-carving are based on lines, and calligraphy is just one of them.¹³

From an aesthetic point of view, the wild cursive script had its root in Daoism.¹⁴ The idiosyncratic scholars (狂士, *kuángshì*) who spearheaded this new form of artistic expression in the Tang Dynasty had disregard for the traditional boundaries placed upon them by the society. Through years of practise, they laid a solid foundation for handling the brush strokes. Like other forms of visual art, practitioners of Chinese calligraphy spend long hours learning the brush, ink, paper, and their interaction. Only through a mastering of these techniques could one hope to begin creating artistically. It is analogous to a toddler learning how to walk. They need to be so focused on their walking that they could not possibly be creative in their steps. Similarly, calligraphers could not express freely without first achieving fluidity with their brush strokes. Once this hurdle is overcome, each stroke will more easily capture the beauty of nature. This is not true artistic beauty yet, just like music mimicking thunder is not necessarily beautiful. However, this is an important step that every calligrapher has to go through. Eventually, nature becomes one with artistic instinct, and the calligrapher will then be free from constraints, and able to freely express according to his own will. This progression from a primary concern with technique, to a spiritual understanding and eventually becoming one with nature and ones inner-self is not easy. This is very similar to the state of mind advocated

12. 賴玉光, 書道入門 — 草書篇, 10.

13. 李霖瓚, 藝術欣賞與人生, 第四版 (台北市: 雄獅, 1987), 136-40.

14. 沈清松, 天心與人心 (臺北縣新店市: 立緒, 1999), 65; 王元軍, 唐人書法與文化 *Chinese Calligraphy and Culture of the Tang people* (臺北市: 東大, 2008), 34.

by Zhuangzi (see Section 4.2).¹⁵ According to Wang, to achieve this stage, one has to release oneself from the restrictions placed on us by traditional doctrines, and immerse ourselves in the grand beauty of nature.¹⁶

Wild cursive script is based on shapes of Chinese characters, with stokes and details abstracted. There are strong relationships between characters, and amongst verses. The lines involved are like something moving fast, demonstrating a strong sense of velocity. I was especially inspired by the works of Zhang Xu and Huai Su. Their works radiate glittering energy of motion through the use of lines, and became a great stimulus for my own work.

Through studying wild cursive script, I noticed a synergy between the speed of road and wild cursive script, both in terms of form and spirit. In terms of form, they are both composed of cursive and continuous lines, and not individual sections. When writing in wild cursive script, it is important to note the continuation between the word before, and the one after.¹⁷ Similarly for roads, most racetracks are continuous sections of lines. These all project a sense of speed.

In terms of spirit, I noticed the feeling of speed does not come from the road itself, but from the imagination of cars and people travelling on the roads. For wild cursive script, the lines are still if our mind is still. We perceive the writer's emotion through the flow of his brush strokes. See Section 4.1.4 on the discussion of stillness.

Thus the continuation and flow of lines in my work is critical in expressing the sense of speed. I decided to link sections of lines together to form a coherent work, much like individual brush strokes are joined together to form a complete passage (Figure 5.28).

15. 王元軍, 唐人書法與文化 *Chinese Calligraphy and Culture of the Tang people*.

16. *Ibid.*, 69-89.

17. 林耀川 左宜有, 草書入門 (台北市: 藝術圖書, 2009), 20.

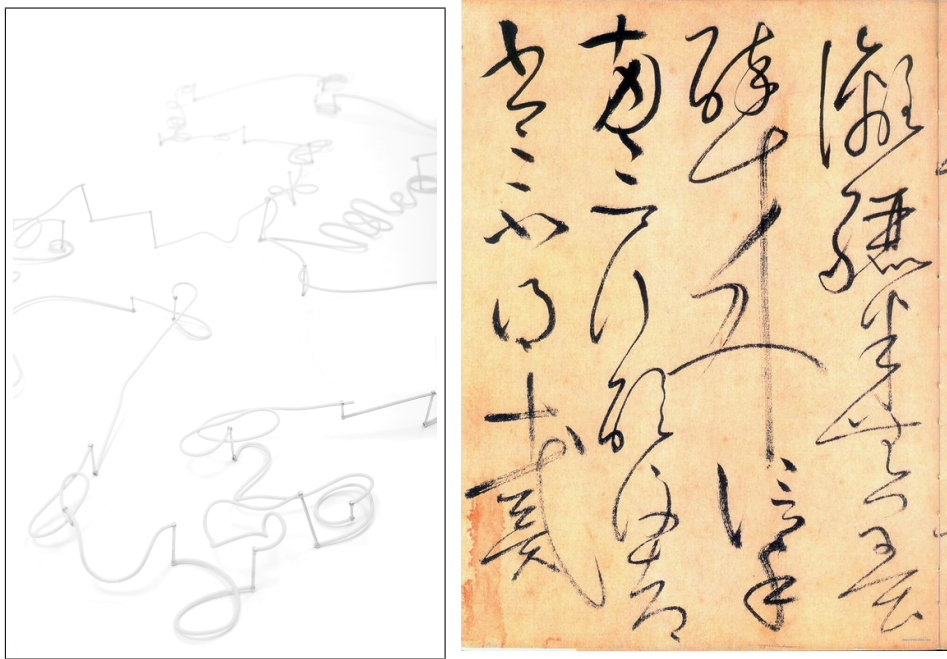


Figure 5.28: An example of the *Fragility of City Living* and an example of wild-cursive script by Huai Su. Photo by Eva Chan and image from <http://www.shishu.info/xoops/modules/wordpress/index.php?p=55>.

5.3.2 Inspiration Through Toy Roads

After studying wild cursive script, I came to look at roads again, not just real roads, but also toy roads.

Children's toys, like toy cars, toy roads and toy guns, are really simplified versions of the 'real' world, and also a minimised version of the adult world. Although these toys are simplified and minimised, they are always able to retain the essence and core values of the complicated, real-life objects. Living in the city, we sometimes lose sight of the environment we live in. Because modern buildings are much bigger when compared to our body, it can be more difficult to relate to them. Toys, on the other hand, shrink and simplify. They bring the enormous objects of the city back to a scale that we can easily relate to, and even handle with our own hands. In *Sculpture Today*, Judith Collins discussed this in some detail.¹⁸ She said "by manipulating size and scale, artists can affect

¹⁸. Judith Collins, *Sculpture Today* (Phaido Press, 2007), 388.

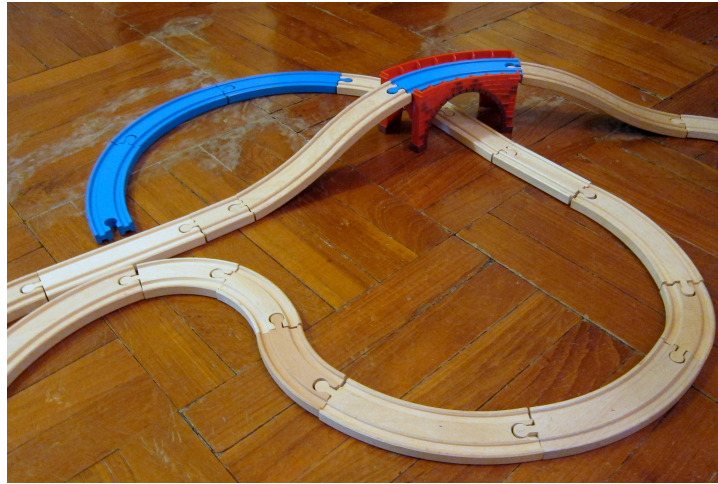


Figure 5.29: Toy roads. Photo by author.

viewers in a psychological way, making them feel either large or small in the context of what is displayed before them... The process of reducing or enlarging an object introduces issues of control, distance and how we measure things in relation to ourselves.” Robert Morris, in his seminal *Notes on Sculpture, Part II* (1966), said “a small object or sculpture is essentially closed, spaceless, compressed and exclusive, because the viewer’s need to get close to it diminishes their field of vision.”

Through observing and playing with toy roads, I acquired a more acute understanding and insight in the power of works in small scale. They allow the viewers to come closer. They can even transform public relationships into private ones, which is the people-oriented relationship that I am after.

5.4 The Fragility of City Living

The following are images of the final pieces of work I developed for this project, from Figure 5.31 to 5.33. The metal linkages were made of a typical sterling silver. The links were made into standard sizes, mirroring the standardised parts that our city is built of. This standardisation also



Figure 5.30: Road system in Hong Kong. Photo from <http://depositphotos.com/3573138/stock-photo-Aerial-view-of-complex-highway-interchange-in-HongKong.html>.

allowed the works to present themselves in an infinite number of different ways. In fact, each assemblage would not be entirely the same, just as each city is developed slightly differently due to its cultural background, history, geography and economy, among other factors.

A non-permanent way of assembling the work was chosen to emphasise the city's high-speed development, and its fragility. Relatively speaking, buildings are not meant to last long anymore, so the works can also be disassembled and rebuilt with ease. However, these pieces are different each time they are put together. What has disappeared from the previous construction will be gone forever.

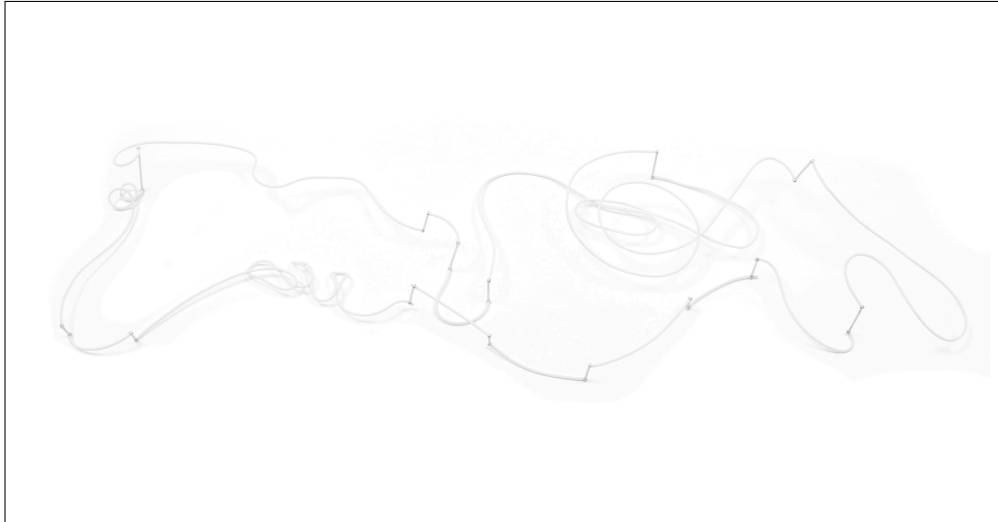


Figure 5.31: From *The Fragility of City Living* series (top view). Photo by Evan Chan.

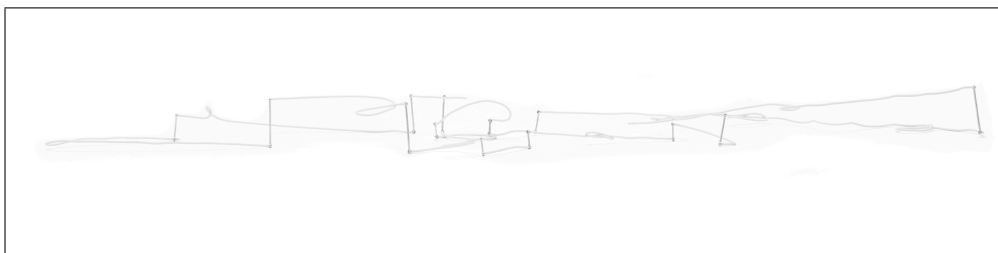


Figure 5.32: From *The Fragility of City Living* series. Photo by Evan Chan. (side view).



Figure 5.33: From *The Fragility of City Living* series (detail). Photo by Evan Chan.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

For this practical research project, I used porcelain and metal to create a new series of work that reflected my study of the fragility of city living. I chose to use porcelain and silver as an echo to the concrete and steel we use to build our city. Since fragility is a central theme of my work, the usually strong material of porcelain is made into very thin wires, turning it into something delicate. Inspired by roads and wild cursive script in Chinese calligraphy, the pieces were composed with tortuous, but continuous lines. The connecting lines aimed to create a sense of speed, in an effort to portray the high-speed development of our city under the banner of economic efficiency.

A major aim of the project was to add to the dialogue about city living, which has been ongoing between my contemporary peers for some time. The artists reviewed in Chapter 3 share the same passion and conviction in their discussion of city living, and how its inhabitants are being affected by the inherent qualities of living in a city, like the pace of change, isolation and discontentment, to name a few. In Chapter 4, I discussed linkages of my research to the Chinese philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi. Their ideas of contrasting states of macro and micro, and to be still and stay weak, formed an important foundation to the development of this

research project.

The focus of this discussion is centred on the fragility of the relationship between people living in the city, and between people and their surroundings. The main form of this series was inspired by the duality of roads, namely their ability to both connect and to divide. One of the goals was to articulate the similarly dual nature of city living. We enjoy more opportunities and live a more convenient life, but our relationships with each other and the land become more fragile. People here are being ignored or choose to ignore, resulting in fragility in the relationships around us. Under these inhuman conditions, people's needs are being neglected. Rather, a people-oriented society places its focus on its people and their needs to be involved in the community. It has been my intention that this project contributes to and raises awareness of the contemporary condition of life in Hong Kong.

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